

Whence Cometh Respect?



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“One Improved Unit” is an original column appearing sporadically on Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found here. OIU-only RSS feed available here.

I think that many people are confused about what respect is and where it comes from. Some claim that respect is owed by virtue of who they are, say a parent, or of what they’ve done for someone, such as bought them something or otherwise provided for their material needs. Others claim that respect is owed by virtue of title. And further, when one does what another commands without question, this is called respect. All of these kinds of people and ideas are wrong, and here’s why.

Respect Defined

Respect is both a noun and a verb, but their meanings are similar: to treat with, or to have, “deferential regard or esteem”, about sums it up. What does that mean in practice? To have a feeling of respect toward something, one regards them, or it, with “kindly feelings which springs from consideration of estimable qualities.” Estimable (admirable) is like beauty or worth, it’s subjective, a determination made in the minds of those considering said qualities.

Origins of Respect

If respect is the result of kindly feelings, which are a result of considering certain qualities as estimable, which is a subjective determination, then it follows that respect, too, is also subjective. What is considered respectful behavior, like what is considered beautiful art, differs from person to person. As people are social animals, there is likely general agreement on what constitutes respectfulness in a given society, though like people, not every society will consider the same behaviors as respectful or disrespectful.

As respect is felt, people will behave respectfully toward other people if they not only understand what that person considers respectful, but desire to treat that person respectfully. The first is primed through a general knowledge of what constitutes respectfulness in a given society, as mentioned, but the second must be preceded by the act of bonding.

Bonding

Treating someone respectfully, like all purposeful behavior, is a means to an end (which end may also be a means to an end, of course). Which end? Likely, at least, the maintenance of a valued relationship. How do relationships become valued? Through bonding. When people bond, they get to know one another on a personal level. They learn about each others needs, wants, and aspirations. They learn about interests they share in common. They become friends and feelings of mutual-admiration and regard develop. And they become more familiar with each others qualities, like temperament or intelligence. Each person then assigns worth to those qualities and determines for themselves whether or not the other deserves their respect (to be treated with respectfulness). As importantly, the bonding also serves as a way to communicate, verbally or not, what respect means to each person so that the other has more knowledge with which to work from.

Children

Now, if respect is earned through bonding, then those who've bonded with a person will most likely receive their respect. This seems to start in infancy. As baby suckles mother's breast, they're eyes lock, and through both touch and sight, they bond. Thus begins respect. As baby grows and begins to learn more about the world around him, he, hopefully, bonds with others besides his mother. As bonds are built, what the child understands as respectful behavior is developed. Though he's still immature and will likely behave disrespectfully toward others, so long as he's regarded properly as a growing child and treated with respect by others, he will eventually come around to being more mindful of how respectful his behavior is perceived by those he cares about, and soon the rest of society.

Teenagers

Jumping forward, we've all likely witnessed a teenager swearing and yelling or otherwise treating one or the other of their parents disrespectfully. Why would they do that? If respect is earned through bonding, then disrespectful behavior is a symptom of a broken bond. How did it break? Any number of ways, really. Most kids in my society - and likely yours - are coerced to do all sorts of things they'd rather not do. Go to bed too early, eat all their food, wake up too early, go to school, do homework, spend time with family they barely know (or like) because all their time is spent in school or with friends. You name it. Somewhere, someone - I put most of the responsibility on the parents - dropped the ball. The bond was broken for any number of reasons, and coupled with resentment and anger for likely the same reason, disrespectful behavior was the result.

Should said parent take the path of authoritarianism and begin threatening punishments or the removal of privileges? Is that more likely to earn them respect, or more resentment?

My implication is not to say that taking the path of permissiveness is the answer. Oh no, no, both are unwise styles of parenting. Rather, the relationship needs to be healed, the bond re-kindled, and this is more successful through the utilization of active listening, empathy, determining needs, and meeting them. And of course, that isn't easy. But to get started, I recommend either Thomas Gordon's *Parent Effectiveness Training* or Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*. Both are great tools for this.

Not Just People

Consider also respect for things. For example, firearms. How does one learn to respect firearms? Is it automatic? I don't think so; I think it occurs through bonding. Becoming familiar with firearms, initially indirectly, through seeing what they are and what they're used for, like in the movies, but ultimately through handling, one develops a healthy respect for firearms. I think this applies to everything.

Fear

If respect is earned through bonding, then what do you call it when one person does what another person commands without question? That could be because the one has genuine respect for the other (based on admiration) and is a genuine disciple, but its just as likely that the one fears retribution by the other – or a third-party – for disobedience. He's seen what happens to those who disrespect the one commanding, and fears it happening to him. Hence his obedience. Too many people, in my opinion, confuse this obedience from fear as respect. And too many demand respect by virtue of their ability to make others fearful of them.

Self-Respect

I'd like to comment also on self-respect. If respect is deferential regard based on subjectively determined estimable qualities, then self-respect is just that, deferential regard toward oneself. However, because this regard is based on a subjective determination, self-respect can only accurately be judged to exist, or not, by the person in question. When others say things like, "That girl has no self-respect..." they likely do so ignorant of the girl's standard of respect. In which case, this is an unhelpful statement to make. Rather, if you're worried about another's self-respect, become influential in their lives by first earning their respect toward you, through bonding. Then you'll have a a better idea of their standard of respect and can accurately judge their level of self-respect, and work to change it.

Final Thoughts

If I want my children to respect me, I *must* build my relationship with them through bond. That's the only way that I can see to earn their respect, something I value highly and very

much desire. The moment I use fear, or otherwise do anything to damage our relationship, I'll lose their respect, as I should. I wouldn't want them respecting anyone who hasn't properly earned it by showing them their estimable qualities through bonding. And there whence cometh respect.

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