

DRIVING LESSONS

Spoiled

By Lu Hanessian

How do you spoil a child? Is it a matter of too much or too little of a good or bad thing?

How do you measure spoiling? Can he be spoiled one day but not the next? Who decides?

Is spoiling intentional or insidious? Is it hereditary, a family habit passed down through the years?

And where did we ever get the idea that a baby could be spoiled by responding to his cry?

Generations of new parents have bought into the notion that picking up a crying baby will spoil him. I assumed this was a fifties fallacy. But I was stunned to discover literature dating back to the 1920's describing the same parenting mindset in this country.

So, we've essentially been stressed about spoiling for at least eighty years.

But why?

Webster's dictionary says this:

Spoil: "to take away the pleasure from; to damage or ruin; to impair; to detract from; to injure (esp. a child or domestic animal) with respect to character during the formative period with overindulgence or too much leniency..."

Which begs the question: Why are children and domestic animals in the same sentence?

Decades of attachment research have explained that picking up a crying baby is the healthy response from a caregiver. And studies have further shown that fulfilling a baby's need for immediate gratification is appropriate for that child's emotional growth—at that stage. It's when a parent carries that gratification over into toddlerhood and beyond that the whole enchilada begins to, well, spoil.

Maybe parents aren't sure they know how to make that transition. So we put the plane on automatic pilot and hope for smooth ride. Then turbulence hits, and we grip the armrests tightly as if that could stop the plane from bouncing.

Spoiling may have become an issue for us as parents because we confuse wants and needs.

When my son was two, he wanted to stand under the eavestrough in the rain with his mouth open, but didn't. At five, he wants ice cream for breakfast, but eats waffles. He may need a little one-on-one with me, but might express it by disrupting his brother's homework.

How does a parent stay centered enough to decipher what's really going on—so we don't spoil the goods?

A child can't always express his emotional needs, and acting like a "spoiled brat" may be very different from actually being one.

Spoiled is not an emotion.

Children who cry are not spoiled.

Children who argue, protest, and whine are not spoiled.

Even kids who stomp, scream, wail in humiliatingly public ways aren't necessarily spoiled.

Spoiled is not what happens when a child's tears become his way of forcing an adult to change her stance. It's what can happen when a parent unknowingly shows her child how to communicate dissatisfaction through power struggles, ultimatums, and high-decibel rage—by responding in kind. By enabling a child to resort to control tactics instead of connecting strategies. By modeling it ourselves.

We've been taught that we ought to prevent spoiling by putting the kibosh on "bad" behavior. But that hasn't stopped the behavior.

Maybe spoiling isn't about our kids after all.

Maybe it's about our fear of their unedited emotion. Maybe it's our own painful feelings that are awakened when we hear the siren wail of their discontent. Maybe it's about our unwillingness to teach a child how to understand himself—and us.

If spoiling is the byproduct of overindulgence, then maybe attention is the antidote. It's never too late to stop seeing our kids in an unforgiving light, and start looking at the person behind the protest.

Even a "spoiled brat" might agree with that. ###

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