

Your child's bad behaviour: Influence or is it you?

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Do you dread parent-teacher meetings and constantly worry that you may have created a mini-monster in the classroom? Are you worried you may have accidentally encouraged your children to engage in poor eating habits? We explore to what extent your child's bad behaviour and poor habits may be influenced by other children, or alternatively, by your parenting style. By Nicola Haw

While we all attempt to raise our children to be well adjusted, healthy and successful people, often a child seems to have his or her own agenda when it comes to behaving. Toddlers throw epic tantrums in public, primary school children refuse to listen or eat their greens, and high school children cut class and roll their eyes into one more detention than you would have hoped for. We speak to Somerset-based psychologist, Rene Pfaff, to observe whether your child is being negatively influenced by his or her peer's, or if you have done the damage.

Could I be making my child naughty?

We, as parents, are the first role-model our child will ever have. We are responsible for discipline and set most of the expectations for a child. We therefore have a substantial responsibility to shape good behaviour at home, that is to be repeated in all social settings.

"If parents provide a stable, secure and predictable environment where children know what is expected, then children often do not need to act out," says Rene. "Children sometimes behave badly to get attention, as negative attention is better than no attention at all," notes Rene. If children are used to being given attention at home when bad behaviour occurs, they will mimic this in public. In addition, if irregular expectations are set for children's behaviour, between the home and at school, they will have a difficult time realising what is appropriate and what will not be tolerated. "Focusing on good behaviour and rewarding that from an early age is the most positive way to ensure that children repeat the right behaviour in all settings," she says.

It has been said that by example is not another way to teach, it is the *only* way to teach. "All children see their same-sex parent as their primary role-model, and will copy what their parents do," observes Rene. A parent should role model appropriate behaviours, at home, for a child to repeat elsewhere.

If you are too lenient, do not set appropriate boundaries, are not consistent and instead model behaviors which you consider inappropriate for your children at home, you may be indirectly encouraging them to repeat these behaviours in other social settings, such as school.

Am I making my child fat?

Apart from setting expectations for good behaviour, research conveys that parents also have substantial ability to shape healthy eating, and lifestyle habits. You could be encouraging your child's reliance of unhealthy meal options and behaviours if you do the following:

Set a poor example:

The Journal of Pediatrics recently observed that 80 percent of obese 10 to 14-year-olds with obese parents, will be obese in adulthood. Although this is largely affected by genetic predisposition to weight gain, it is also heavily influenced by children modeling their parents' lifestyle habits. A study conducted by the Dartmouth Medical School concluded that children, whose parents' commonly made healthy grocery selections, mimicked these choices while playing with a toy grocery store.

Use food as a reward:

"If you finish all your peas, you can have ice-cream after supper." Does this sound familiar? If you use unhealthy foods as rewards for eating healthy foods, your children will invariably come to think of eating nutrient-rich foods as an unpleasant ordeal which requires praise. In addition, if you equate unhealthy foods as a reward for good behaviour, it is likely that your child will continue to reward themselves with unhealthy foods as they grow older.

Allow too many snacks:

Expert for the NBC's Today Show, Joy Bauer, observes that allowing your kids to snack too often during the day will mean that they are less likely to eat important food groups at meal-times. "Try sticking to a constant meal and snack schedule. Allow at least two hours between snacks and meals and no more than two to three snacks a day," she advises.

Fill up with fruit juice:

The Journal of Pediatrics also observes that children on average children consume 10 to 15 percent of their daily kilojoule intake from sugar-sweetened drinks such as fizzy drinks and fruit juices. While these drinks contain a large amount of sugar, they often have little of the nutrients found in fruits and in addition won't keep your children full. If you give your children concentrated fruit juice regularly you may be encouraging weight gain. Experts recommend encouraging your children to drink water, and diluting fruit juice when your children do have it.

Bending to the demands of fussy eaters:

Feeding your children anything, just to get them to eat is a sure way to cause weight gain. If your children are not fans of healthy foods, experiment with different healthy recipes and get them to participate in the process.

On the other hand

Although parents are the people with the power to influence their children, behavioural issues and poor habits cannot always be purely attributed to parents. If you have done everything in your power to instill

positive and healthy values, provide a good role model and support system for your child, then there are potential, additional factors that should be considered as causing bad behaviour and poor habits.

Expert, Mark Sichel explains, “Most parents have struggled with the notion that they are at fault for their children’s behaviour, however the notion is just as fallacious as parents taking credit for children’s achievements.”

Peer influence

“Pre-school children’s focus is primarily to please their parents and teachers, and other children have little impact on their behaviour, although they may copy older siblings at this stage,” says Rene. Younger siblings will often copy their older siblings as they express their dislike for certain foods. Parenting style is however vital in shaping good behaviour and positive habits in the early ages.

After the age of 10, however, children’s peer groups tend to gain greater significance in their lives. Children will generally mimic the behaviour of others in order to feel accepted and acknowledged. “Teenagers are highly susceptible to peer pressure and may tend to adapt their behaviour in order gain acceptance and to feel a sense of belonging,” says Rene. Peer pressure is most effective before the age of 18, after which teen’s have been observed as being able to set boundaries more firmly.

Kids will be kids

Experts observe however, that a small amount of bad behaviour from your children and the hesitance to embrace healthy ways of living is to be expected and shouldn’t be cause for concern. “Do not expect a child to be a little adult – they need to play, make a noise, make a mess, make mistakes and enjoy the short and carefree time as a child,” says Rene. Parents shouldn’t catastrophise these situations and should be patient with reports of bad behaviour and children turning up their noses to offers of fruits and vegetables from time to time, as long as it doesn’t form into a long-lasting habit. At the end of the day, children are humans-in-training. Understand it as all part of the process.

Protect your children from negative peer influence (sidebar)

- **Talk about your values:** Ensure your teen is aware of your values, including doing well in school. Explain to your teen why you prioritise the values that you do.
- **Let them make decisions:** An important part of resisting negative influence, is the ability to make decisions and follow through with them. Let your teen learn to make decisions at home, and as long as they are not harmful, respect these decisions.
- **Communicate:** Ask your child which people at school they admire, and which people they do not. This may help them to identify values which they respect, and those which they do not.
- **Teach your child bail-out signals:** If your child struggles to stand up to a friend who asks them to engage in unhealthy behaviour or, teach your child examples of what they can say. If they need to, they can blame you. For example; “I can’t do that, my parents would kill me.”
- **Affirm them:** Praise your children when they make good decisions and choices.

- **Distract them:** Ensure your child remains busy in a sporting activity or hobby to ensure they are influenced by the right people with healthy habits, and are distracted away from the negative influences.

See page xx about the importance of team sports in providing your child with positive role models.

Sources: Rene Pfaff; Mark Sichel; www.psychologicalscience.org; www.nationalreview.com; www.parentfurther.com; www.psychologytoday.com; www.whattoexpect.com; www.education.com; www.sheknows.com; www.urnm.rocehster.com; www.saveourskills.com;