

Core Strength: Respect

We frequently receive calls from desperate parents asking if The Buckeye Ranch could help a child who is outrageously disrespectful to parents, family, school personnel and peers. Parents describe behaviors creating problems in every aspect of the child's life and causing tremendous stress in the family. We receive such pleas every week from caregivers of children who show extreme forms of disrespectful and rude behavior.

It makes sense that disrespectful behavior is viewed as something serious enough to merit professional help. Respect has been identified as a core strength necessary for people to live emotionally satisfying lives. A chronically disrespectful child creates a level of tension and conflict in the family that infects all family members and makes life miserable. It is not only unnerving for a parent when their child is argumentative and mean-spirited in response to parental expectations, it can feel threatening and evoke responses that set off a vicious cycle of argument and conflict. For the child, disrespect for authority can result in oppositional and defiant behaviors that limit their chances of success in all arenas of life.

Surprisingly, brain science gives us insight into how disrespectful behaviors develop and why teaching respect is both important and difficult. Much of it is related to how our brains process information. The human species has thrived in part because our brains evolved to detect any potential threat and rapidly activate an internal alarm system. This results in a brain that is sensitive to negative or threatening input. Recent studies show what many of us already knew – humans tend to focus on negative experiences more than on positive ones. In other words, unless a parent works hard to teach a child to observe positive interactions, they will naturally notice and remember negative cues which shape their perception of people.

This also means that our brains respond negatively to things that are unfamiliar. What a child internalizes is a direct result of what they repeatedly see and hear. This speaks to the power of role-models in the lives of children. When children spend significant time involved with electronic media, the prominent characters in that media become familiar and the child's norm for comfortable behavior. If physical aggression and dominance are frequent observations for a child, the child will learn to respect that style of problem solving and will naturally model that. Caregivers must recognize that respect does not naturally develop within a child, it must be actively taught.

We live in a world in which children are flooded with role models that are rude, mean and disrespectful. Parents must work harder than ever before to counteract forces pushing a child toward such behaviors. The most important way to do this is through consistent modeling. When caregivers solve disagreements by listening and calmly reaching solutions, children come to respect this. How parents respond when disrespect is observed can set the stage for important conversations. Parents can learn a great deal about how their child sees the world when they ask them what traits they respect in others and who they want to emulate. Try it – it could lead to some enlightening and informative discussions!