

The Six Kinds of Testing and Manipulation

Who's in Charge at Your House?

True or False? Kids' self-esteem and creativity are both higher when they can "do their own thing" and they are not exposed to external limits imposed by adult authority.

Believe it or not, this statement is false. A number of studies have come up with the conclusion—which makes sense when you think about it—that kids feel better about themselves and perform better, creatively and otherwise, when they learn the boundaries for reasonable behavior.



The world itself has all kinds of limits and rules. There are rules for how to treat other people, speed limits, laws about property rights, rules for sports, interest payments, taxes, marriage. You may not like all these regulations, but if you don't recognize them, you will get hurt and wind up more frustrated than you would be if you followed them. Parents are the ones who introduce their children to life's boundaries.

How parents establish rules and set limits—or fail to set limits—not only has a tremendous effect on the self-esteem of a child, but it also affects the relationship between parent and child, the parent's own self-esteem and the overall atmosphere for everyone around the home. These effects are enduring. They involve not just a particular hour of a given day, but they involve weeks and months and years.

The parents' job here is complicated. It first involves coming up with reasonable rules. These must then be communicated clearly to the children. Then they must be enforced on a regular basis. And finally, when they are being enforced, children rarely say, "Thank you for your efforts." Instead they test and manipulate.

You often hear the phrase, "Believe it or not, kids really want limits." This isn't quite the case. It is true that in the long run, youngsters are more comfortable in a house where parents have clear, reasonable rules and enforce them consistently and fairly. The kids are more comfortable whether or not they realize the connection. At any one moment, however, children want what they want, and they are angry and disappointed if they don't get it. This often leads to testing and manipulation.

Testing and manipulation are the efforts of the children to get what they want. They don't want to go to bed, they want the candy right before dinner, they don't want to get up and go to school, they do want to hit their sister. In order to get their way and foil their parents wishes, children automatically tend to test and manipulate. They can do this in six ways:

1. Badgering
2. Temper
3. Threats
4. Martyrdom
5. Butterup
6. Physical

1. Badgering

Badgering is the "Please, please, please," or "Why, why, why?" business. The child keeps after you and after you and after you, trying to wear you down with repetition. Just give me what I want and I'll shut up! If the parent attempts to verbally respond to everything the child says and every time he says it, Mom or Dad is in for a very long and frustrating session. Many parents continue on an endless wild goose chase looking for the right words or reasons that will make the child be quiet.

2. Intimidation

Intimidation is an aggressive verbal attack, and often involves temper tantrums. Here the aggravated child may yell at you, accuse you of being a bad parent, or otherwise storm around the house. Older kids sometimes get into swearing. Younger children may throw themselves on the floor, bang their heads, and kick around ferociously.

3. Threats

"I'll never speak to you again!"

"I'm not eating dinner and I won't do my homework!!"

"I'm running away from home!"

These are all examples of threats. Something bad is going to happen to you unless you cease and desist from this ridiculous discipline at once.

4. Martyrdom

Actually not talking, not eating dinner, or sitting in the closet for two hours might be examples of martyrdom.

“No one around here loves me anymore. I can’t see the point of going on.”

Crying, pouting, and looking sad or teary can also be effective. Here the goal is to get the parent feeling guilty.

The first four tactics, Badgering, Intimidation, Threat, and Martyrdom, share a common, underlying dynamic. The child, in a sense – and without quite knowing what he’s doing, is saying to the parent something like, “Look, you’re making me uncomfortable by not giving me what I want. Now I’m making you uncomfortable with all my harping, tantrums, ominous statements, and feeling sorry for myself. Now that we’re both uncomfortable, I’ll make you a deal: you call off your dogs and I’ll call off mine.”

Sounds good, right?

If you do give in, you are almost guaranteed that the testing and manipulation will stop immediately. The problem, however, is then who’s running your house? It certainly isn’t you, it’s the kid. All they have to do in a difficult situation is get out their big guns and they’ve got you.

5. Butterup

The fifth tactic takes a different tack. Instead of making you feel uncomfortable, the child tries to make you feel good.

“Gee, Mom, you’ve got the prettiest eyes of anybody on the block.”

Or, “I think I’ll go clean my room. It’s been looking kind of messy for the last three weeks.”

Here something good is going to happen, and this kind of testing sometimes precedes the frustrating event. Have you ever heard a parent say, “The only time he’s ever good is when he wants something.” That’s probably butterup, or what is also called “Sweetness and Light.” This type of manipulation is occasionally kind of tricky, because it’s hard to tell apart from genuine affection.

6. Physical

This is perhaps the worst. Here the frustrated child either physically attacks you, breaks things, or runs away. Children don’t usually start doing this all of a sudden. Many of them have a long history of this kind of behavior, and the bigger they get, the scarier it gets.

Our research with parents and teachers has indicated that the three most common tactics are Badgering, Intimidation, and Martyrdom. As you might expect, girls are likely to use Martyrdom more often than boys, while boys are more likely to use Intimidation more than girls. Both sexes like Badgering, and the least often used strategies are Butterup and Physical tactics.

The crux of the matter with testing and manipulation is this... if kids are successful in their testing efforts, they will continue to use these tactics in the future. The household will suffer the consequences: prolonged and frequent periods of emotional upset. The kids’ favorite tactics are Badgering, Temper and

Martyrdom, and none of these make for peace and enjoyable relationships. In the long run everyone's self-esteem is damaged.

Managing Testing and Manipulation

Imagine two four year olds, Joe and Ben, in two different homes...

Let's assume that both children wanted Sugar Crisp cereal for breakfast, and their mothers got it for them. Let's then assume that both children changed their minds when the bowl arrived and requested Frosted Flakes instead. Naturally the parents resist, saying, "No dear, this is what you wanted," which prompts the children to knock the bowl of cereal on the floor and go into a major fit of temper. They scream at the top of their lungs, become beet red, and pound the table with both hands.

Let's take a look at the defining moment for the futures of parents and children alike...

House 1: Joe's mother calmly counts. She knows children get like this sometimes, and though it's very aggravating, he's just a kid. In spite of the counting, Joe continues his tantrum. After the third count, Mom escorts Joe—still yelling—to his room for a short rest period.

House 2: Ben's father, on the other hand, becomes very upset and first tries to be firm with his son. He can't stand this kind of conflict and doesn't know why the boy has to be so unreasonable. He explains that Ben must eat what he requested and he can't go around throwing his food on the floor. Ben howls louder. His father now pleads, "Come on now, this is ridiculous," as he glances nervously at the clock. It says they must leave for preschool and the train in seven minutes. "All right, all right, just shut up! Here's your stupid cereal and you'd better eat it all, pal!" Ben chows down happily.

Upon visiting the two households a year later, we find that five year old Joe is learning high frustration tolerance (HFT) which will be an important part of his character. He is better—though far from perfect—at tolerating his parents' "No's" because their limits are fair and reasonable and he knows they mean business. The home is generally peaceful, and Joe often spends time reading with his parents. He's learning to recognize quite a few letters and words.

When we enter Ben's house, however, we are greeted with screaming. It's Ben vs Mom this time. The child never seems to be able to take "No" for an answer. Ben is learning low frustration tolerance (LFT). His temper is terrible, and often Mom and Dad just give him what he wants to avoid a battle. At other times, though, they don't feel he should be running the house, so they make periodic efforts to "out scream" him. Lately this has resulted in his hitting them, and then—totally fed up—they spank him and put him in his room. This leaves them feeling terribly guilty and makes them easier targets the next time around. They used to try to read to him on occasion, but quit because he was so temperamental. Now for the most part they try to avoid him unless something absolutely has to get done.

Fantasy? Not at all.

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Limits—properly explained, imposed and enforced—have a dramatic effect on the comfort level around the house. They allow affection to unfold naturally and learning to take place. They also produce an atmosphere where other things that foster self-esteem can occur: positive reinforcement, active listening and fun.

How does a parent set and stick with reasonable limits?

You make the revolutionary switch from talking to counting. This is what Joe's mother did in our breakfast crisis earlier. Rather than getting all upset and arguing, she used what is known as the "1-2-3," or counting method.

Here's how it works...

Let's say the kids are fighting (we all know now that sibling rivalry is a pastime for the kids and a torture for their parents). Most parents are skeptical when they first learn how to use counting. There's a simple part and a hard part. Here's the simple part: the parent holds up one finger and says, "That's 1."

That's the first warning. Nothing else is said. If the kids behave, that's wonderful, but if they hit a 2 and then a 3, they have to take a brief "rest period" – stair, chair, corner, bedroom. One minute per year of their life (e.g., five year old takes five minutes).

When they come out, there's no talking, no lecturing, no apologies, no explanations. You don't ask who started it. You carry on as if nothing had happened. Believe it or not, in a matter of days—sometimes just hours—the children start responding at 1 or 2. And the first time you stop a fight across a twenty foot room by just saying, "That's 1," and you don't have to get up or scream, you're going to feel real good.

Many parents hear this and say, "Come on, that's too simple. There's got to be a catch." There is a catch – and here's the hard part. The 1-2-3 won't work—guaranteed—if you're having a tantrum yourself while trying to "discipline." "That's 1. Come on now, I'm getting sick and tired of this. Your sister never behaves this way! When are you going to learn to listen!?" OK, that's 2. Look at me when I'm talking to you, young man! WERE YOU PUT ON EARTH TO DRIVE ME CRAZY!?" Etc., etc."

Is this discipline? No way. It's an undisciplined parent, and it's going to be a self-esteem crash for both the parent and child.

When parents start using the principles from 1-2-3 Magic, things change fast. Our studies have shown that about half the kids will cooperate right away. The other half, however, will test first – they'll give their parents a hard time for a while. The good news, though, is that we're on to them now. We now know the six kinds of testing and manipulation and how to handle them.

How do you handle testing and manipulation? Easy. With the exception of Butter Up, you count it!

The reactions to counting are enlightening. Kids say “I like it.” Ask them why they like it, and they’ll tell you, “Because Mom and Dad don’t yell so much.” Being screamed at by a large parent is a big thing to a little child .

How about Mom and Dad? One astonished mother said that after using it for a few weeks, instead of dreading each day, she actually got up in the morning and looked forward to seeing her three children. But the real proof for her was after summer vacation. “When they went back to school in August,” she said, “I actually missed them for the first time in my life.”