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Good Counsel: Dealing with demanding children

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Written by Daniel J. DeMarle

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A not uncommon parent complaint is that the child is running the household. This may be a 3-year-old whose temper tantrums are controlling the household, an 11-year-old whose anxiety is leading to more and more limits on the family's behavior or a 17-year-old whose social schedule dictates the family existence. When this is happening, there are specific steps a family can take to resolve the issue:

Recognize that there is likely a degree of truth in the feeling and that there is a problem. A 3-year-old, an 11-year-old and many 17-year-olds do not have the maturity to make adult decisions. Adult decisions range from when a child goes to bed to what will be served at dinner and to when an adolescent's curfew is — or whether they have a cellphone.

Realize that power in a family cannot be stolen, it can only be given. An adult caving into a 3-year-old's temper tantrum is giving power to the 3-year-old. This is power a child cannot handle. Fortunately, power given, can be taken back.

Sort out what has led to the problem. Is this a short- or long-term chronic problem? Is this a response to a child's disability, such as obsessive/compulsive disorder? Families routinely go through periods of stability and instability. A tired, overstressed parent is more likely to allow a demanding 11-year-old to dictate dinners and social arrangements. Sometimes the reason this happens is obvious and sometimes not. At times the family will need to work with a professional to find the underlying issues, and/or to provide treatment for a specific disability.

Begin to adjust the parent/child balance. This involves the parent setting and enforcing reasonable limits. There are many techniques and skills that parents can use to accomplish this goal. It has been done many times, no matter how tough it might seem at the outset. Carefully choose the limits. Once a limit/rule is stated, if there are two parents in a house, they must both enforce this limit. If a parent caves or doesn't back the other parent, the parents credibility is undermined; thus, the parent's power is diminished once again.

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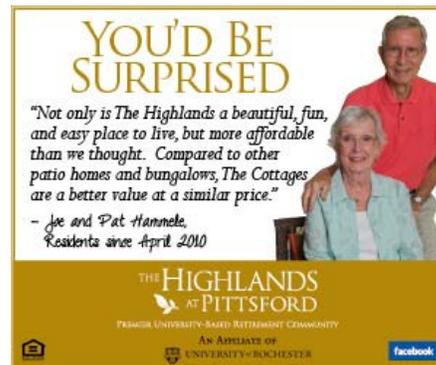
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After the parent is setting and enforcing reasonable limits, the child needs to be taught the art of the compromise. This is particularly necessary with older adolescents. They are becoming adults and need to have a sense of their own power and autonomy, but not at the expense of the family. A good compromise allows the parent and adolescent to both gain from an agreement.

DeMarle, Ph.D., is an education specialist at DeMarle Inc. in Rochester.



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