To Get What They Want
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PARENTING

To Get What They Want

Why children try to "push your buttons"

You don't love me! if you did, you'd let me stay up and watch TV! Everyone else's mother and father does. They love them and you don't love me!" So opens Dr. T. Berry Brazelton's chapter on "Emotional Manipulation" in his book, Touchpoints, The Essential Reference. Brazelton explains how this blatant attempt at manipulation will be familiar to parents. It will be accompanied by a wretched, oppressed expression. The lack of subtlety of such a request indicates that the child knows she hasn't a chance. But it will still impact parents, many of whom will react angrily.

Emotional manipulation is usually thought of as an attempt to control another person by artful, unfair or insidious means. Within the parent-child relationship, it is normal, and unless parents overreact, not all that insidious. Children are trying out their wings.

In thinking about emotional manipulation, parents should first remember that they, too, manipulate their children "for their own good." They often try to influence children's behavior--with rewards, praise, bribes and threats. Children

learn to model themselves on their parents. Even a toddler soon learns that bringing her favorite book over to her parents is more likely to distract them from their conversation than simply asking for attention. Looking sad or nestling next to a parent on the couch is effective, too. Manipulation is involved in almost every part of a child's day, commonly through invidious comparisons. He might say, "You are always nicer to him than you are to me. You let him get away with it, but you always get mad at me." To encourage cooperation and reduce a child's attempts at manipulation, the following suggestions may help.

1) Before problems arise, discuss the issues. Openly present the choices and the way you'd like the child to behave. Use times when the child is in control to discuss issues, not when she's in the midst of a struggle. 2) Respect her for her capacity to make the choices you offer. Gear them to her age and ability to maintain control and to remember the choice she's made. 3) Remember that provocative behavior is the child's way to test herself and her own limits. 4) Examine your own tolerance for the child's misbehavior. Perhaps certain activities make you overreact. 5) Join her in what you want her to do. This not only gives her a model but also gives you both a sense of communicating with each other. 6) Recognize that escalation of parental pressure and manipulations results in escalation of defiance in children; offer alternatives. 7) If you definitely want a child to do something, never ask, "Will you?" Instead, say, "Now it's time." 8) Praise her after cooperation is achieved.

Manipulative parents undermine trust, detracting from the child's ability to live up to a situation. When parents are direct

and honest in their expectations for a child, she has the experience of being entrusted and empowered. Honest communication is the most powerful system parents can establish. Parents are then modeling for the child an alternative to emotional manipulation.

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