

Verbal Freedom and Respect

What makes some children challenge teachers verbally with remarks like "If you do that once more, I will report you to the Ministry of Education!" at a tender age of 8? Do our children talk back to us? While teachers and parents may be at fault some times, should such outbursts be ever encouraged? Is there a place for disrespect regardless of circumstances and age?

Regardless of circumstances and age, all disrespectful attitudes are unacceptable. It has to start at home. If we do not address this at home and allow disrespectful attitudes to cultivate, submission to authority in the schools, at the work place may become an issue later. From as young as 2 to 3 years old, such attitudes can be seen via the tone of voice or facial expressions. If unchecked, our children will learn very quickly to challenge us disrespectfully.

Sometimes our children learn disrespect unconsciously when we parents fight for our own rights or the rights of our children too often. It may appear as protecting ourselves or our children but over doing these is self-serving and deprive our children of learning from hardship. Usually, the concept of 'customer service' is applied to the home to better serve ourselves. We end up expecting to be treated well, cultivating a sense of selfishness – an attitude of "I deserve better". Cultivating that at a young age (actually at any age but worse from young) is not appropriate and generally results in our children wanting to be treated better; when they ought to first learn to serve others respectfully.

What about building confidence and allowing children to learn to 'speak up'? Will such training reduce their confidence? Does that mean children should not be heard in the home? Should we not allow them to "express freely"?

Confidence building need not be disrespectful. It is cultivated not by giving the freedom to express unreservedly. Usually children are suppressed and become timid because of harsh parental responses, we react rather than respond.

Parents may need to review our responses frequently but it is not that we need to give more unchecked 'verbal freedom'. We may have grown up with parents who are harsh. So in compensation, we allow 'free speech'. This has probably created too much of unchecked verbal freedom in the next generation.

With the toddlers. Basically stop them firmly (not harshly) every time they say something disrespectful or unkind – whether in words or in attitude (tone of voice or facial expressions). Of course these should be done in private – that means in public places, we will have to move to a quiet corner before we address our children. This is showing respect for them too. Inconsistency here will create confusion and result in more verbal freedom. Thus it is important for parents to ask ourselves what are acceptable. Husbands and wives also need to review each situation especially when both disagree. If one or both parents have the attitude that children are still young and therefore such disrespect can be excused then perhaps it is a good time to pause and reflect first. Remember that habits / attitudes formed young are stronger. If an attitude is not acceptable for an adult, why should it be an exception for a learning child?

With the teens. It is still possible to reprimand disrespectful attitudes but much depends on the relationship. If the parents are the ones setting the example, for instance with vulgar language or harshness of tone, then we need to work on these at the same time. At this stage, to address verbal rudeness will be a challenge. Parents literally have to bend backwards to gain the trust of their teens by setting excellent examples before their teens will respond. When appropriate, apologies must be given or even seeking of forgiveness. You may read an article on teen communication below:

<http://fcd.ecitizen.gov.sg/NR/rdonlyres/7DFD4A3B-036B-4390-8CAC-7953CDED3660/0/SFENewsJul2008.doc>