

# you can **family** answerbook \*PARENTHOOD

## spoilproof your child

By T. Berry Brazelton, M.D.

**JULIA IS A BLOND-HAIRED GIRL WITH big brown eyes and a winning smile. Everyone who sees her remarks, "She's so cute!" She's used to this admiration. But she often ruins it. At the supermarket checkout she might grab at the candy display and whine in a loud voice, "I want candy!" And when her mother says, "Not now," she'll stomp around and scream, "That's not fair. You only buy the things *you* want to buy." Julia is having a temper tantrum, a two-year-old's temper tantrum. The only problem is she's already six!**



Her mother stands by silent and embarrassed, her expression helplessly enraged. It appears as if she's not at all sure what to do. Julia is clearly spoiled. Her mother's indulgence is obvious to any onlooker. And it is confusing to her daughter.

A spoiled child is often an insecure, anxious child. Her difficult behavior can be seen as a child's search for firm limits from those around her. It is as if she is afraid no one will say no. And this lack of appropriate response leaves her without boundaries. Julia's behavior would provoke a desire in anyone to say, "Stop! That's enough." And when an adult in the vicinity intervenes with a firm

but respectful "No," Julia looks up almost gratefully, as if to say, "At last."

Every child needs discipline and reassurance and will go to great lengths to compel his parents to set limits. That's why an insecure child has a harder time behaving well. He is too busy acting out in an effort to get the reassuring response he needs.

The key to "spoilproofing" your child is to provide him with appropriate expectations and reassurance. Setting firm limits is the best way to let your child know that someone is there who cares.

The late Selma Fraiberg, author of *The Magic Years*, a wonderful classic on children ages three to five, says

that a child without discipline doesn't feel loved. Discipline—which means teaching, not punishment—is the second most important thing we parents can give. Love comes first, but discipline follows close on its heels. With it, a child will thrive and have an easier time developing into a well-balanced, happy individual.

Children are reassured by limits and boundaries. The more reassured a child is, the more comfortable he will be with himself and the easier it will be for him to behave appropriately.

But teaching your kids how to set their own limits isn't a one-shot deal. It can take years.

"I have to stop you until you can stop yourself" is the mantra you will repeat over and over again as a parent. The ultimate goal

**The ultimate goal is for your child to feel, *I know when and how to stop myself. I am in charge of me.***

is for your child to be able to feel, *I know when and how to stop myself. I'm in charge of me.* With this self-knowledge comes the freedom to feel more relaxed and comfortable within himself.

When a parent doesn't set limits, the result can be disastrous for both parties. A child needs a parent, not a peer or friend.

A baby is already testing her parents for the limits of what matters and what doesn't. Starting at eight months—when she has learned to crawl—she will approach the forbidden television, but look around to be sure you are there to say no.

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In the second year she begins to provoke a response by walking up to the stove or running toward the street, watching out the corner of her eye to be sure you are there to stop her.

Mothers of two- and three-year-olds call me in desperation: "I feel like I'm saying no all the time. I hate myself. I don't want to be that kind of nagging parent."

A child sets up testing the boundaries. But she can keep a parent on ten-

terhooks—always jumping to stop her. The trick is to choose your battles wisely.

Make rules that stick so that discipline can become a firm positive rather than a negative. "This is where it stops. I have to stop you every time until you can stop yourself." Then watch for the relief on your child's face. Limits are reassuring.

Rituals, traditions and firm expectations also provide boundaries. On the other hand, bribes and indulgences rarely go hand in hand with comfort and

support. They may make parents feel better, but they don't nurture a child in her ability to problem solve.

When a child begins to test you by spoiled or difficult behavior, it is time to try to understand what is behind his actions. Is he feeling anxious? Does he need you to be firm in your expectations? Does he feel as if he isn't pulling his weight? Is he trying to let you know that he's worried about something?

Be attuned to how he's feeling. Make special times

to be with your child alone.

Don't probe—it will just be a turnoff. But wait and listen carefully. And be available to understand.

"When you get like this, I know you are worried. I can't say yes to your demanding behavior, but I surely want to help. Can you share your worry with me?"

In this way, you can help your kids understand themselves, and support them as they learn how to solve their own problems and enjoy being their reassured self. What a gift!

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# Love Means Limits

Why do parents spoil a child? Here are five probable reasons:

**1 It is hard to say no.** Basically, it feels negative. Today, with so many parents away from the home all day, it's uncomfortable for them to spend their precious free time with their kids saying no. And yet children may have waited all day until their parents return to feel safe enough to test for limits. In your response to this behavior, be firm but respectful.

**2 A child may seem vulnerable.** If a youngster has been ill or at risk, the parent is likely to feel overprotective. Instead of letting the child struggle and become frustrated before he achieves each step, it is hard not to rush in to help. "Let me help you so you can do it right." In the process a parent begins to take away the opportunities for the child to learn how to do it for himself. He begins to feel vulnerable and helpless. He clings. He whimpers for help before he tries a new task. Meanwhile he may seek attention by provocative behavior. When his parent is on the phone, he goes for a light or a precious vase. He knows what maneuvers will get attention. He may be seeking limits.

**3 After a stress in the family.** During a difficult time such as separation or divorce, it's hard not to want to spoil a child. "Of course you want candy," a parent responds at the checkout counter. "Which one—green or yellow?" Quickly the child becomes confused. "What do I want?" She senses her parent's vulnerability, and it's not reassuring. She begins to want to be indulged all the time. Soon no one will like her. Other kids shun this type of behavior. And your daughter will no longer trust herself. She can sense the disapproval around her even as her parents try to reassure her by giving in to her.

**4 Because a parent feels inadequate.** If someone believes he can't give his child the life he'd like to give him, he may feel that indulgence in simple things (for example, junk food) is a way to compensate. But is it really? "I wish I could give you everything, but I can't. Here's an ice-cream sundae. Will that help?" It actually can have the opposite effect of



Nurture a child by a show of family ties, such as dinner together, rather than indulgence.

leaving your child feeling that he wants more.

**5 When a parent feels her child is being victimized.** It's natural to want to smooth over a difficult time for your child. "You've had such a tough time in school being bullied. Yes, you can watch extra TV." But is this the best way to make her feel better about her bad day? This approach might be more reassuring: "It is awful to be bullied. I feel for you. But maybe you have to stand up to them. Let's make a plan about how you can do that." Then enjoy a regular family dinner together. No extra frills. Your kid is more likely to feel securely backed up by this show of family ties than by special treatment.