

Getting Back the Respect of Your Kids

Question:

I have a question for you about my own situation.

We have a 7 year old son and a 5 1/2 year old daughter. Somewhere along the line I feel like we have lost their respect. I don't feel like they have very obedient hearts or try very hard to obey us. We have not always been consistent in our discipline and that is probably part of the problem. It seems like they are often getting into mischief—doing little things that they think are funny but are also clearly inappropriate or not allowed. The issues usually revolve about small things that are fairly insignificant except for the fact that they have been asked not to do these things. Two recent examples are: moving sand out of the sandbox and getting it into the grass, playing with their stuffed animals in the dirt, etc. I feel like if they can't obey in the small things then how will we be able to trust them to obey in the big things. I guess my question would be this: How do we regain their respect, or get their hearts back, or “reel them back in”?

It's very hard to articulate this into an email, but if you have any advice, I would sure listen.

Response:

1. Be consistent in your discipline.

You may have diagnosed your own predicament. If you are inconsistent in your discipline they will certainly be inconsistent in their obedience.

I am personally greatly influenced to do right by a lot of external factors. I'm afraid of getting caught. I have a healthy fear of God. I think that even if I don't get caught God will make me get caught anyway. I'm afraid of sin's destructive impact on my life, the lives of my family members, and the lives of all who know me. When feeling particularly holy I might even be afraid that I could bring shame to God.

I don't usually choose to do right just because I'm such a nice person. At times, in the flesh, I don't feel I have an obedient heart at all. I can feel quite dark and ugly. I can scare myself. I pray for a good heart, and I wish I obeyed just because I really love Jesus that much, but in reality I'm often far more selfish than that.

What I'm saying is that I definitely need a heart change. However, while God is reworking me, I also benefit from some significant external pressure. God gives me various motivations to do right (positive and negative), I work on my heart, God gives me grace to choose correctly, and hopefully somehow it all results in a life that honors God.

I wouldn't expect my kids to be so well-trained or godly that they just obey me out of the goodness of their hearts. It's a great idea, but practically they are going to need the help of some external motivation to choose what is right. You need to provide that for them in a consistent fashion. This will help reel them back in.

2. Set clear boundaries.

"Don't take stuffed animals outside," is a clear boundary. "Don't play with your stuffed animal in the dirt," is less clear. What is "play with"? Can they carry them across the dirt? Can they play in the dirt while holding the animals? Is it okay to put the animals in the swing above the dirt? What is "in the dirt"? Is the grass okay? What about the thinning part of the yard? What about the sandbox?

The clearer the instruction, the more likely that they will obey it and that you will enforce it.

3. Don't be discouraged by their disobedience.

Disobedience in children is to be expected. Don't take it personally. Just deal with it (with discipline) and move on.

To be honest, the examples you gave don't sound too bad. If they are yelling, "I hate you", cussing at you, or sticking their tongues out at you, then I'd agree that you've lost their respect. To me, these two instances sound completely within the realm of what can be expected. I'm not saying it's okay. I'd discipline for it. However, I wouldn't be surprised or discouraged by it.

4. Invite a trusted friend to observe the situation.

Find a Christian friend who is a parent you respect. Invite him or her over for a few hours and ask for feedback on your kids and your parenting. It can be humbling to take such direct input in such a personal area, but it can also be greatly valuable. We try to frequently get similar input from friends, family members, babysitters, and Sunday school teachers. The closer the person is to you, the more valuable the input is likely to be.