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What is permissive parenting? Could you recognize its telltale signs in others—or yourself? I think the best way to appreciate what permissive parenting is, and how to avoid its pitfalls, is to look at real-life examples of permissive parents in action.

1.) Let's start with the mom waiting for her 5-year-old son to return home after his first day of kindergarten. As he comes down the steps of the school bus, he's greeted by his mom who is so excited to see him up to the point where he kicks her. Though the kick is painful and a shock, the mom says to her son, "Robert, why are you so angry? You know it's not nice to kick your mom."

This mother's response is permissive and indulgent because it totally dismisses how her child's behavior affected her, and she doesn't tell him that his behavior will not be tolerated. The correct response would have been for the mother to immediately scold her son for kicking her and to impress on him that he is never to kick his mother again. His behavior was totally unacceptable, and a consequence should follow. Later, when things have calmed down, the mother can ask her son why he was so upset and talk with him about appropriate ways to handle his anger.

2.) A couple has been invited to their friends' home for a Saturday night dinner. They arrive dressed for a formal evening and with a bottle of wine for the host and hostess. Dinner is served in the dining room at 9:00 p.m. and much to their surprise, a play table has been set up with two small chairs so the hosts' 4- and 5-year-olds can join them for dinner. The guests had little opportunity to talk with their friends who were constantly distracted by their children. By the time dessert was served, the children were playing under the dining room table and banging into the guests' feet with their loud, silly play.

Permissive parents tend not to draw clear boundaries between adult time and time with the children. And if *these* parents were not so permissive, they would have recognized that they needed to spend some adult time with their company. The correct way of handling this situation would have been for the hosts to feed their children earlier, and then for one parent to excuse him/herself to put the children to bed before dinner was served. Another approach would have been for a sitter or grandparent to come in to care for the children so mom and dad could spend time with their guests.

3.) Now for a twist on the previous scenario ... two parents arrive at an engagement party with their three children. There are only adults at the party, but since the invitation did not state "adults only", they brought their kids along. As the guests lined up for the beautifully arranged buffet, the front doorbell rang. It was the pizza deliveryman. The hosts were confused since they hadn't ordered a pizza, but soon discovered the mom had ordered it for her three young children because they'd turned up their noses at the wide range of delicious food being offered.

Permissive parents constantly cater to their children, and sometimes even in situations that are insulting to others. To begin with, these parents created an awkward situation by bringing their children to an adult party, and providing special food to satisfy their picky eaters added insult to injury. But once at the party, the correct course of action for these parents would have been to inform their children that there was plenty of food on the table for them to choose from. If they didn't want to eat, that was their decision, and special food would certainly not be provided to accommodate them in someone else's home.

4.) As the next example illustrates, permissive parents opt for a kinder, gentler—and, ultimately, ineffective—approach to time-out. A 6-year-old boy defies his mother's request to clean up his toys, so she sends him to his room. Without a hint of annoyance or frustration in her voice, she sweetly tells her son to choose one of his favorite storybooks and stay in time-out until he feels ready to come out.

This permissive parent is wrong because time-out is not supposed to be a pleasant experience that the child controls. The parent needs to be in charge of the time-out experience and tells the child when time-out ends. It should be a boring time and at the end of time-out, the child should be asked if he is ready to cooperate with his parent's request.

5 & 6) In the next anecdotes, permissive parents give choices when none should be offered: It is evening and time for bed. The mom turns to her 7-year-old daughter and asks, "Would you like to go to bed now?"

Permissive parents disguise their orders by asking questions instead of telling a child what they want because they do not want to upset their child. By doing this, they frequently give up their authority and let their children make decisions that should be up to the parents. Parents know best when it is bedtime and when it is dinnertime, etc. By posing directions as a question, the child is likely to say, "No, I don't want to go to bed," and "No, I don't want to come to the dinner table now," and "No, I don't want to turn off the television."

Two parents are halfway through dinner. Dad calls out to his 5-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter—who are eating in front of the television—and says, "I think it would be nice if you two would join us at the dinner table."

Permissive parents often have the habit of making ambiguous requests when they need to be direct and clear. "I think it would be nice if you two would join us at the table" invites and encourages the children to say "No." Consequently, the child disagrees with the parents, undermines their authority, and these situations usually end with the child being in charge of the parent.

These examples clearly identify the characteristics of permissive parents. Rather than asserting their authority, they abdicate it. They don't take charge, opting instead to indulge their children's whims. In the process, they're encouraging their children to be self-centered, demanding and unresponsive to the requests of adults, and oblivious of the impact their behavior has on others.

Naturally, these children don't mature emotionally. Their manners are as poor as their social

skills. The family's home life turns chaotic as their exhausted parents try to manage manipulative children who neither listen nor cooperate.

Not surprisingly, a fair amount of my work as a child psychologist involves helping parents give up their permissive ways and take charge of their family. If you would like to learn more about how not to be a permissive parent—and how to assert your authority—I recommend John Rosmond's book, *Parent Power*.

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