



# Parents Ask!

By Dennis O'Brien, MA, LCSW

## Parents Ask: How can we convince her teacher that our child does give others the respect they deserve?

This is the wrong question. When a teacher voices concerns that the gifted child does not show respect for others—most likely meaning classmates and the teacher herself—parents need to ask: how can we help our child understand how important respecting others is, learn how to do it, and value it enough to do it consistently.

Parents play a crucial role in helping their children develop appropriate social skills that will help them succeed in school and at work and build satisfying social relationships throughout their lives. Doing so requires honesty about what their child needs, honesty about their own behaviors, the courage to make some changes in their own behavior if they need to, and a commitment to persist with their action plan when things don't turn around immediately. Here's how:

- **Begin by gathering information.** Ask teachers and other adults who are in position to observe your child interacting with others what they see. Does he listen to others, praise and encourage them? Does he thank them when they offer suggestions or do something thoughtful? Or does he ignore others? Criticize them? Put them down? Knowing the specifics will help you make your intervention more focused and effective.

- **Examine your own behavior.** Does your child see you gossip about others with your spouse or with friends? What sort of critical things do you say on your cell phone when your child can hear you? Are you phoning or texting friends frequently, even at meals or when driving your child to school? There is a reason the College School in Webster Groves, MO, has a prominent sign saying, "Cell phones not allowed in carpool line." Even if you are not gossiping, ignoring children like this shows disrespect and a lack of awareness of how to use a valuable opportunity to interact positively with your child and possible other children. Perhaps you need a rule for yourself: "Cell phones not allowed when driving children."

Does any of this describe you? How often has your child heard you put other people down? How often has she seen you so preoccupied with your own agenda that you have not been really present to her? Have you complained that you or your child was not being treated respectfully? Unfortunately, many high achieving parents lack social skills themselves and fail to model healthy social development for their gifted children. These parents typically value the intellectual development of their child above all else, are highly critical of teachers and programs, belittle other children, and insist on getting special advantages for their children.

- **Model the respectful behavior you expect of your child.** This should include speaking positively and praising others. It also includes thanking people, even if they are simply doing their job. Gifted children are observant, and if they see you trying to be respectful, they will come to value it also. And if you make a mistake, say so. Let your child know that you know you were disrespectful and will try to do better.

- **Make your values explicit.** Make it clear that people don't have to be smarter than you to deserve your respect. Be sure that you say how much you value your child being able to get along with others, working as a teammate and being well-rounded. Your child, like so many very bright children, may think that what you value most is how quickly she learns. You may have unwittingly contributed to this misperception by praising her too often for doing so and not enough for other positive character traits and behaviors.

If you don't find other qualities of hers to praise, your child will begin to believe intellectual prowess is of paramount importance to you. It shouldn't be, and you need to make sure that she understands it is just one of a number of character traits and behaviors you value, including those at which she does not excel. Explain that you value being well-rounded, persistent, compassionate and cooperative. Stress character traits that you think might be most important to your child at this point of her development.

- **Explicitly teach your child social skills.** Talk about the importance of eye contact, smiling, listening without interrupting, praising someone for having good ideas, taking turns, playing fair, using other children's names, praising them, making intentional efforts to be pleasant, and asking, "How was your weekend?" Role play these skills with your child. Coach a little.

- **Make it clear you expect your child to learn to get along** with all her classmates and to form friendships with some of them. Encourage her to look for opportunities to praise the skills, insights and behaviors of others that show positive character traits such as honesty, kindness, perseverance and cooperation.

- **Follow up** by asking how she used these behaviors in her daily interactions. Ask about the opportunities she had to show respect, cooperation and good sportsmanship at school. Just asking will communicate the importance you place on these values. Praise her for her efforts. Ask how she thinks her good behavior affected others, and reinforce the positive.

- **Involve your child in activities that nurture cooperation and respect for others**, such as the hands-on, team-building approach of Gifted Resource Council (in St. Louis), Scouting or team sports under a coach who values teamwork over individual prowess.

Parents who use these strategies will help their gifted child learn to consistently show respect for others. This, in turn, will help their child develop invaluable, life-long social skills that will enhance her career and lead to more satisfying relationships with others. Everybody wins.



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