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Relate to Your Kids

By Dr. James Dobson

It is important to build relationships with your kids from their earliest childhood.

Today's parents must work harder than ever at building satisfying and affirming relationships with their kids. When I was younger, parents didn't have to depend as much on communication and closeness to keep their children in line. They could control and protect them, more or less, by the imposition of rules and the isolation of their circumstances.

My folks understood that system. They had a million rules. There were regulations and prohibitions for almost every imaginable situation. Coming from a minister's home in a very conservative church, I was not allowed to go to the movies (which were remarkably tame), or to dances, or even to use mild slang.

I remember being reprimanded once for saying, "Hot dog!" when I got excited about something. I'm still not sure what danger those words conveyed to my dad, but he warned me not to say them again.

In those days, parental authority typically stood like a great shield against the evils in what was called "the world." Anything perceived as unwholesome or immoral was kept outside the white picket fence simply by willing it to stay put.

Fortunately, the surrounding community was helpful to parents. It was organized to keep kids on the straight and narrow. Censorship kept the movies from going too far, schools maintained strict discipline, infractions were reported to parents, truant officers prevented students from playing hooky, chaperones usually preserved virginity, alcohol was not sold to minors, and illicit drugs were unheard-of.



It will come as a surprise to no one that this commitment to the welfare of children has all but disappeared. Rather than assisting parents in their child-rearing responsibilities, the culture actually conspires against them. Alas, the white picket fence is gone. Harmful images and ideas come sliding under the front door or slither directly into the bedrooms through electronic media.

As the world has become more sexualized and more violent, there are just too many opportunities for kids to get in trouble. Further, innumerable "voices" are out there enticing them to do what is wrong.

And these days, grown-ups seem to work longer and longer hours. That introduces one of the greatest points of danger. It is almost impossible for moms and dads to screen out harmful aspects of the culture when they are rarely at home in the afternoon. An unsupervised kid can get into more mischief in a single day than his parents can straighten out in a year.

Considering how the world has changed, it is doubly important to build relationships with your kids from their earliest childhood. You can no longer rely on rules to get them past the predators in the wider world.

It still makes sense to prohibit harmful or immoral behavior, but those prohibitions must be supplemented by an emotional closeness that makes children want to do what is right. They must know that you love them unconditionally and that everything you require of them is for their own good. It is also helpful to explain why you want them to behave in certain ways. "Laying down the law" without this emotional linkage is likely to fail.


With all the temptations buzzing around our kids, simply saying "no" a thousand times creates a spirit of defiance. We have to build bridges to them from the ground up.

The construction should begin early and should include having fun as a family, laughing and joking, playing board games, throwing or kicking a ball, shooting baskets, playing pingpong, running with the dog, talking at bedtime, and doing a thousand other things that tend to cement the generations together. The tricky part is to establish those friendships while maintaining parental authority and respect. It can be done. It must be done.

Dr. James Dobson, America's foremost parenting expert, shares advice on shaping the will of the strong-willed child. Learn what works, what doesn't, and how you can help your headstrong child become a man or woman of great character. To request a copy of *The New Strong-Willed Child*, visit www.family.org/resources.

Dr. James Dobson is founder and chairman of the board of the nonprofit organization Focus on the Family (Colorado Springs, CO 80995; or www.family.org). Material is excerpted from *The Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide* and *Bringing Up Boys*, both published by Tyndale House.

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