

# Fresh Kids: How Can Parents Change Them?



- ◆ *Four-year-old Tommy has been playing on the living room floor. As bedtime approaches, his babysitter tells him it is time to put away his toys. "You can't make me!" Tommy declares. "You're not my mom!"*
- ◆ *Six-year-old Sherika is coloring at the kitchen table while her mother talks on the phone in the living room. Suddenly Sherika calls out "Mom! Get in here right now! I need help!"*
- ◆ *Eight-year-old Lenny snatches his homework paper away from his father, saying, "Gimme that! You're so dumb you can't do anything right!"*

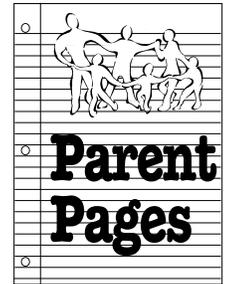
Not so long ago, rude or "fresh" behaviors like these would have received prompt, predictable reactions from the adults in each situation. Scoldings, spankings and other punishments were generally considered effective as ways to teach children polite behavior.

Today, however, many parents are struggling to find non-violent, positive ways to communicate with their children.

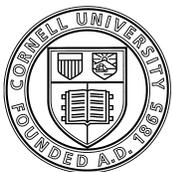
Some say that punishment is not effective and often increases a child's misbehavior, while others worry that spanking may convince children that hitting people is all right.

Most parents feel angry, hurt or helpless when their children are fresh, but many adults admit that they laugh at the wise remarks made by sassy kids on television. However, they are less amused by the same comments from their own children! The following guidelines may be helpful:

- ◆ Adults who have contact with a particular child will have to discuss and agree on their definitions of acceptable behavior. If, in the first example, Tommy's babysitter is distressed by his comment to her, but Tommy's mother thinks he's funny and his father's attitude is "he'll grow out of it," Tommy will get mixed messages about his behavior. In fact, he'll probably repeat it to see how the adults react next time. His parents can tell Tommy that they do not like rudeness and that they expect him to learn socially acceptable ways to behave.
- ◆ Adults must make clear their expectations for the kinds of language and behavior they find acceptable. The babysitter might say, "Tommy, you can tell me that you don't want to put away your toys, but you do have to follow my rules while your mom is not here -- she left me in charge of you." If Sherika's mother reacts to her daughter's command to "Get in here!" by storming into the kitchen and yelling "Don't talk to me like that, young lady!" Sherika will learn that what she did was very effective; it got her mother into the kitchen very quickly. Instead, Sherika's mother could establish the rule by saying, "Sherika, you may not interrupt me when I'm talking" and



~Continued~



Cornell University  
Cooperative Extension  
Orange County

Community Campus  
18 Seward Avenue, Suite 300  
Middletown, NY 10940-1919  
845-344-1234  
[www.cce.cornell.edu/orange](http://www.cce.cornell.edu/orange)  
Printed 8/2008

tell the child what she does expect by saying, "When I finish, if you need help you can say, Mom, could you please come here?"

- ◆ Adults can let children know exactly how they feel when derogatory remarks are made to them. Lenny's father could say, "Lenny, that remark made me feel hurt and angry. You can tell me that you're feeling frustrated or disappointed, but you cannot insult me."
- ◆ Adults can demonstrate to children the kinds of speech and actions that communicate love, acceptance and respect. Good manners are caught, not taught. Adult-to-adult as well as adult-to-child communication teaches by example, which is more powerful than lectures or punishments. A parent who tells children to "Get over here!" can expect to hear the same kind of command from her children to her. A parent who tells children to "Shut up!" is teaching them that "Shut up!" is acceptable. Children will imitate not only what you say but how you say it, as parents discover when they hear a child repeat something they have said using the same tone of voice.
- ◆ Give children attention when they are not being fresh, and turn your attention away from them when they are rude. Children learn quickly how to get adult attention and most children would prefer to be scolded than ignored. Let your child know that you notice and appre-

ciate polite language and courteous behavior -- particularly from members of your own family. If a child persists in fresh talk, parents can say something like, "You can tell us how you feel but you'll have to do it in ways that don't make us feel mad or hurt. If you want suggestions from us we'll help you. But if you want to talk like that you'll have to do it in your own room where we can't hear you. You choose -- stay with us and speak in ways we can accept, or go to your room and talk to yourself."

In summary, don't laugh, smile or indicate amusement when children are rude. Make it clear that you will not allow people in your family to be discourteous -- to family members or to others. Tell children specifically what you do expect to hear from them. Accept their feelings but help them choose acceptable ways to express them. Provide attention to reinforce good behavior.

*Source: Jennifer Birkemayer, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, NYS College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.*