

IS OBEDIENCE A DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTIC IN CHILDREN?

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I was in the book store recently with my oldest and youngest children looking for a gift for my wife's birthday. While shopping I ran into a mother of one of the children who attended our school about 10 years ago. As I usually do, I asked how her daughter was doing in school. The mother responded that her child was doing very well academically, but had made a few trips to the principal's office recently, and implied that her child could be "sassy."

I found myself smiling as told me this, as I remembered her child well. She was certainly had a big personality and strong will. I could certainly see how she might end up in the principal's office from time to time. Interestingly, I found this information comforting. I was glad she still had her strong personality, and while I'm sure the time in the principal's office wasn't pleasant, I was also glad she had been questioning authority.

Now, I must admit, that I can say these "blasphemous" things with some authority, because I also spent my time in the principal's office and at the back of the room when I was a student. Now, as a principal (Head of School), I receive children just like myself and the girl above, in my office from time to time. I appreciate them, and I see them as a barometer to how we treat children in our school.

In our school, we actually view obedience as a form of misbehavior. *Misbehavior* means a behavior that is not conducive to personal or social growth and harmony. Sometimes adults will do a double take when we express this idea. After all, shouldn't children respect their elders, and trust in our guidance and direction? Let's consider the word *obedience* as defined by Webster's Unabridged Dictionary; "to be submissive to authority; yielding willingly to commands, orders or injunctions." Is this what we really want for our children? Is this a quality that employers or our society really needs?

A now famous report conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, published in the early 90's, entitled "What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000", identified personal qualities that employers needed to be competitive in the growing global economy. In addition to basic academic skills, like reading, writing, math and communication skills, the research indicated that employers needed their employees to have foundational personal qualities like individual responsibility, self-esteem, integrity, self-management, decision making and problem solving ability, creative thinking, and the ability to reason and know how to learn. Nothing about obedience!

A recent Forbes article also discussed what employers are now looking for in future employees:
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/meghancasserly/2012/10/04/top-five-personality-traits-employers-hire-most/>

As a parent, I really want my children to be cooperative, respectful and helpful. But I also want them to experience respect, cooperation, and helpfulness. I want them to know that they are valued, that they are safe to make and learn from their mistakes, and that they are capable. I want them to value others, and give them the respect to learn from their mistakes and give them the room to experience their capability. I want them to question authority, even my authority, when it is appropriate! I also want them to learn to trust authority when that is appropriate.

Respect and obedience are not the same thing. But, it can be confusing as a parent. In a moment when I'm exhausted and overwhelmed, obedience from my children sounds like the perfect elixir to all that ails me in that moment. But what am I teaching them if I promote obedience as a value or a virtue? Am I preparing them for the decisions that they will have to make on their own, when I am not around (drugs, personal safety, sex, friends, moral choices, etc.)? Am I preparing them to live in a world where they are needed to solve problems, manage themselves and think creatively? As a colleague of mine said, "We complain about strong-willed children, but do we really want weak-willed children?"

What most parents are really seeking is cooperation rather than obedience. So, how can we create an environment where children can develop their personal autonomy, have a voice (respectfully), develop reasoning skills, and want to be cooperative? Below I have outlined a beginning, using steps for building cooperation with children. Next month, I will also focus on how to use family meetings to help develop cooperation and autonomy at the same time.

Building Cooperation with Your Children

1. **Take time to listen.** Dig deep to understand where your child is coming from when you and he/she have a problem. Take a deep breath and try to see things from their point of view, even if their view isn't logical. Express understanding. "So, it sounds like you're really angry that you have to clean your room because you really wanted to go with your friends to the pool." Check to see if you are right.
2. **Show empathy.** You don't have to agree or condone your child's point of view, just that you understand their perception. "I understand how disappointed you must be that you had to skip the pool time to clean your room. I had to miss a golf game this week because I didn't get my monthly report finished on time."
3. **Share Your Perceptions or Feelings.** Be honest. "I am feeling frustrated, myself. Saturday morning is the time we clean our rooms, and you chose not to do it then. Then you blamed me for your missing the pool trip because your room wasn't clean yet." If you really listened and expressed empathy in the first two steps, your child should be open to listening to you.
4. **Problem Solve Together.** Invite your child to help you come up with a solution to the problem. "What can we do to solve this problem?" or "What could you/we do in the future to avoid this problem?"

With an attitude of kindness and openness, and willingness on your part to solve vs. direct, you will be surprised how well this tool works.