

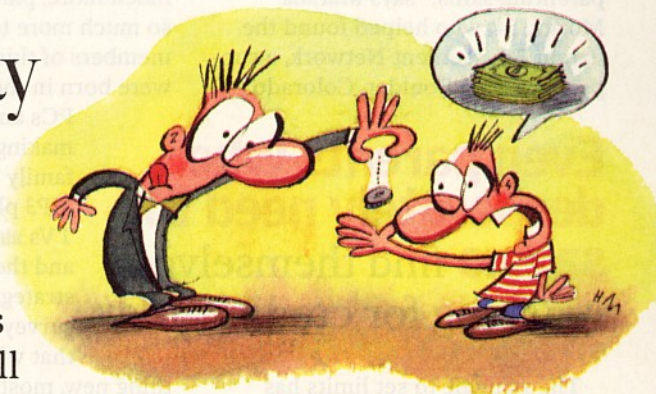
Just Say No

Why parents must set limits for kids who want it all

BY PEG TYRE, JULIE SCELFO AND BARBARA KANTROWITZ

FROM NEWSWEEK

ELOISE GOLDMAN struggled to hold the line. She knew it was ridiculous to spend \$250 on an iPod mini for her nine-year-old son, Ben. The price tag wasn't the biggest issue for Goldman, a publicist, and her fundraiser husband, Jon. It was the idea of buying such an extravagant gadget for a kid who still hasn't mastered long division. If she gave in, how would Ben ever learn that you can't always get what you want? But Ben nagged and pestered and insisted that "everyone has one." Goldman began to weaken. After checking with other moms in her suburban New York neighborhood



and finding that Ben's peers were indeed wired for sound, Goldman caved—but not without one last attempt to salvage some lesson about limits.

She offered her son a deal: "If we give you an iPod, no birthday party." "Done," he said. Then, without missing a beat: "Now what about getting me my own Apple G4 laptop?"

It's an unexpected legacy of the affluent '90s: parents who can't say no. Despite good intentions, too many find themselves raising "wanting machines" who respond like Pavlovian dogs to the marketing behemoth aimed right at them. Even getting what they want doesn't satisfy some kids—they only want more. Now, a growing number of psychologists, educators and parents think it's time to stop the madness and start teaching kids about what's really important—values like

hard work, delayed gratification, honesty and compassion. "It's almost like parents have lost their parenting skills," says Marsha Moritz, 54, who helped found the Parent Engagement Network, a support group in Boulder, Colorado.

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The struggle to set limits has never been tougher—and the stakes have never been higher. One recent study of adults who were overindulged as children paints a discouraging picture of their future: When given too much too soon, they grow up to be adults who have difficulty coping with life's disappointments. They also have a distorted sense of entitlement that gets in the way of success in the workplace and in relationships.

Psychologists who study the problem say parents who overindulge their kids set them up to be more vulnerable to future anxiety and depression. "The risk of overindulgence is self-centeredness and self-absorption, and that's a mental-health risk," says William Damon, director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence at Stanford University.

Today's parents—themselves raised on Greatest Generation val-

ues of thrift and self-sacrifice—grew up in a culture where *no* was a household word. Today's kids want much more, partly because there's so much more to want. The oldest members of this Generation Excess were born in the late 1980s, just as

PCs and video games were making their assault on the family room. They think of MP3 players and flat-screen TVs as essential utilities, and they've developed strategies to get them. One survey of teenagers found that when they crave some-

thing new, most expect to ask nine times before their parents give in. By every measure, parents are shelling out record amounts. According to market researchers Packaged Facts, by 2008 families with 3- to 12-year-olds will be spending an estimated \$175.6 billion on consumer goods such as entertainment products, personal-care items and reading materials for their children—a 16.4 percent jump from 2003. And teens are spending huge amounts of money themselves. In 2003, 12- to 19-year-olds spent roughly \$175 billion, \$53 billion more than in 1997, according to Teenage Research Unlimited.

In the heat of this buying blitz, even parents who desperately need to say no find themselves reaching for their credit cards. Kechia Williams, a 32-year-old single mother of five who works as a custodian at Emory University in Atlanta, rises at

4 a.m. to get to work at 6 in order to make \$9 an hour. She has to work overtime to pay for basics like new school clothes and supplies. And yet her children demand and often get costly gifts. The oldest boys, Darryl, 15, and Kwentavius, 12, have a PlayStation 2 and games worth \$60 each that they play on a big-screen TV. "They're always begging for brand names—FUBU, Polo, Tommy Hilfiger, Gucci, Nike—especially the ones the rappers are talking about," says Williams. "I constantly have to remind them my paycheck will go only so far," she says. "But that doesn't stop them from wanting."

Darryl and Kwentavius are responding to a tidal wave of market-

'cradle-to-grave brand loyalty.' They want to get kids from the moment they're born."

Today, parents aren't equipped to counter the onslaught. Baby boomers especially, raised in the contentious 1960s and '70s, swore they'd act differently than their parents and have closer relationships with their own children. Many even wear the same Gap clothes as their kids and listen to the same music. And they work more hours; at the end of a long week, it's tempting to buy peace with "yes," and not mar precious family time with conflict.

Anxiety about the future is another factor. How do well-intentioned parents say no to all

the sports gear and arts and language lessons they believe will help their kids thrive in an increasingly competitive world? But these parents are confusing indulgence with love. Experts agree: Too much love won't spoil a child.

Too few limits will.

In their zeal to make their kids happy, parents fail to impart the very values they say they want to teach. Jenn Andrluk, a 24-year-old editorial assistant in New York, calls herself a recovering "spoiled brat." As a child in Omaha, she says, she regularly persuaded her hard-working parents to fulfill her every whim—special toys, dance lessons, fashionable clothes and a car. "I told them if they loved me, they'd get it

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ing aimed at kids. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average American child sees more than 40,000 commercials a year. That's in addition to fast-food outlets in schools, product placements in TV shows and movies, even corporate sponsorship of sports stadiums.

Says Susan Linn, a Harvard psychologist and the author of *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*: "The marketers call it

for me," she recalls. As a young adult perched precariously on the first rung of her career ladder, she found it impossible to live within her means and, for a time, relied on handouts from Mom and Dad. Once she was the envy of all her friends because "I always had more than

Learning to overcome challenges is **essential** to becoming a **successful adult.**

anyone." Now, she envies her roommates who can stick to a budget.

No one is suggesting Scrooge as a parental role model. What parents need to find, psychologists say, is a balance between the advantages of an affluent society and the critical life lessons that come from waiting, saving and working hard to achieve goals. That search for balance has to start early. Eve and Jay Gagne, both 30, were each brought up by single moms in New Hampshire. They know what it's like to go without. Now that Eve, a stay-at-home mom, and Jay, a computer executive, can pay for luxuries that their parents couldn't afford, they love to treat their daughter, Sydney, 3, to clothes and toys. But Eve says they're trying hard to be reasonable and not spending too much. Recently, the Gagnes let Sydney play with a giant stuffed rocking horse at a toy store.

Sydney wanted to ride it home. The Gagnes said no. Sydney had a tantrum, but her parents held firm. "We didn't want to give in to every whim," says Eve. "We would like to run the show."

Psychologists such as Laurence Steinberg of Temple University say that's just what parents of a preschooler should do. "Children need limits on their behavior because they feel better and more secure when they live within a certain structure," he cautions. Older children, he says, learn self-control by watching how others, especially parents, act.

Learning how to overcome challenges is essential to becoming a successful adult. Raul and Toni Villaverde, who live in a Miami suburb, say they've tried to walk the line between giving their children what they want and providing them with a strong enough work ethic so they'll become self-reliant. With an older sister at Brown University, 10th-grader Chandler Villaverde has set his sights on MIT. Toni has made it clear she expects him to keep his grades up. So far he's gotten mostly A's and B's. "I got one C one time," says Chandler. His mom's palpable disappointment got him back on track: "I never got a C again." Toni sometimes gave Chandler a hand with school projects in middle school. Not anymore. "Most things I try to do on my own," he says. The Villaverdes also insist their kids do

chores. Chandler takes care of the garbage and dishes, while his sister Lauren, 12, gets the mail, makes coffee and is learning to do the laundry.

Families like the Villaverdes are in the minority. Few parents ask kids to do chores. They think their kids are already overwhelmed by social and academic pressures. "When parents have so little time with their kids," says Irene Goldenberg, a family therapist and professor emerita at UCLA, "they don't want it to be filled with conflict." But kids who have no responsibilities never learn some of life's most basic lessons: Every individual can be of service to others,

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and life has meaning beyond one's own immediate happiness.

That means parents eager to teach values have to take a long, hard look at their own. Says Thomas Lickona, a psychologist at the State University of New York and author of *Raising Good Children*, "It starts with leading a life that centers on higher values so you have credibility when you try to teach that standard."

Across the country, parents and educators are seeking guidance on how to say no. In 2003, the American Society of Professional Educa-

tion, a continuing-education firm based in North Carolina, launched a seminar for mental-health professionals (psychologists, social workers, family therapists and school counselors) to learn how to deal with overindulged children and their "enabling parents." Demand was so great that the \$169 daylong seminar was repeated more than 350 times in 2004.

In Eden Prairie, Minnesota, a group of mothers recently invited Jean Illsley Clarke—a parent educator and co-author of *How Much Is Enough?*—to come help them deal with what one said was "the problem we're having with our neighbors." They all griped that it was other parents who eroded their efforts to set appropriate limits for their kids. Sitting in the meeting room of the local Assembly of God church, these 20 moms expressed real frustration. "How

do we keep grandparents from buying and buying and buying?" "How many birthday gifts should my kid get?" "How many Game Boys are enough?" Clarke says parents and grandparents should discuss these issues so they all stick to the same rules, and find other families who share their values.

That's exactly what some parents in Boulder, Colorado, are trying to do. The scenic college town on the border of the Rockies has long been home to progressive families who eschew cars in favor of bike rides to

the local organic grocery. But over the past decade, an influx of wealthy families brought an infusion of SUVs and Starbucks. Boulder parents were alarmed by a rise in teenage alcohol and drug abuse.

Fearing that their kids were getting out of control, a group of parents and educators formed the Parent Engagement Network, which now offers monthly workshops that cover such topics as parenting skills, morality and ethics for children, and understanding the impact of media on kids. The group also distributes a pamphlet (from Assets for Colorado Youth, a nonprofit group) listing ways parents can show they care without buying things—tell kids how thoughtful a certain action is, acknowledge their insights in a conversation, show excitement in their discoveries, listen to their stories.

Change doesn't come easily. The parking lot at Boulder's Fairview High School still has its share of luxury cars, and more than a few members of last year's graduating class spent spring break in Puerto Vallarta. Parents still feel they have a lot to learn about working together

to enforce the same values. At one meeting, a woman asked speakers to role-play what she should say if she called another parent to check on her kids. "I thought it was a joke," says Fran Raudenbush, a founder of the group. "But it wasn't."

Psychologists say even simple steps can yield huge benefits. When Mary Pipher's son, Zeke, now 34, was a teenager, he had nothing in common with his psychologist mother, author of *Reviving Ophelia*. She is bookish, an introvert who likes to garden. He was a jock and a partyer who stayed out too late and bugged her constantly for spending money. Finally, she instituted a free zone: Once a week, the pair would go out to breakfast with no begging for money or haranguing. Sometimes, they'd have deep conversations; sometimes they'd hardly speak. But it was a big relief—and it brought mother and son closer together. "Going shopping together is not much better quality time than no time at all," Pipher says. "That free zone is what parents want." And kids want it, too—even if they won't admit it.

SORRY, WE'RE FRESH OUT

I recently found this great website that conducts cyber garage sales. You list the stuff you want in the subject line of an e-mail, send it off and wait for a response. Recently, I sent a note saying I was in the market for three particular items. In short order, I got three responses. Nobody had any of the items I'd listed. But they all found what I'd written amusing: "Wanted—Envelopes, piano bench and one night stand."

SANDI SIMMONS