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## **What Kids Need Most**

**By Hal Runkel, LMFT**

Selective ignorance [is] a cornerstone of child rearing. You don't put kids under surveillance: it might frighten you. Parents should sit tall in the saddle and look upon their troops with a noble and benevolent and extremely nearsighted gaze. -Garrison Keillor

No doubt about it, we live in a very scary world. Kids have to deal with the newfound realities of online predators and cyber bullying along with the age old vices of drugs and alcohol. As parents, we want to shelter and protect them from as much of this as possible. We want to do what's best for our children in all circumstances. We want to give our kids what they need most. So, what exactly is that? Buckle your seatbelts. I'm going to give you an answer that just may surprise you.

What kids need most, particularly today in this incredibly dangerous and anxious world, are parents who do not need them for anything. Parents who do not need them to get good grades. Parents who do not need them to be respectful. Parents who do not need them to be appreciative. Parents who do not need them stay away from drugs and alcohol.

Now, I can imagine the confused face you may have after reading those words, because I see that face every time I speak about it in public. Whenever we as parents need our kids to behave, whether it's their behavior toward others or toward us, then we issue them an anxiety-crafted invitation. An invitation to do exactly the opposite of what we need them to do.

You are already aware of this at some level. You can remember your children as two-year-olds doing exactly what you told them not to do, while devilishly looking at you the whole time, wondering about your response. Or

you can remember the countless battles over the messy room, wondering aloud if they're withstanding the smell of their own stink just to spite you.

You know this dynamic is true whenever it seems that your child pushes the exact button you need them to avoid. They are not pushing that button because deep down they desiring to become the next Dr. Evil. They are not pushing that button because they absolutely hate you and love the damage they are doing to your relationship. They are pushing that button, that exact button you hate and cannot handle, for one reason only: because you need them not to.

Needing our kids to behave, or needing our kids not to misbehave, sends out three unmistakable messages:

- 1) I cannot emotionally handle it when you act as a free individual;
- 2) I am not in control of my own reactions, you are; and
- 3) In this scary world, you cannot trust me for leadership. The person you need most is not available because that person actually needs you.

And what happens when we send out these messages? Our kids usually find ways to do exactly what we need them to avoid, even as it makes life worse for them. Self-destructive behavior, especially from children, is never intended that way. Self-destructive behavior (like drugs, bad grades, breaking the rules of the house) is always intended to send a counter message to the messages above—"I'm the one that needs you, Mom/Dad, not the other way around." Kids are asserting their individuality.

When we don't give them the space to do this (because of our anxiety), then they choose destructive behavior in order to get that independence they so strongly desire. Of course, this only heightens our anxiety, our need, and the cycle worsens.

So how do our kids know that we need them? How do we communicate this damaging message? Sometimes, we say it very explicitly, very early in the process. "Honey, Daddy really needs you to get dressed so we won't be late this morning." But it continues in more subtle ways. Like caring more about their homework than they do. Or telling them what to do over and over again, even after we promised ourselves we wouldn't. Or lecturing them

again and again on the dangers of drugs. And then violating their privacy again and again by rifling through their things at the slightest sign of change in their behavior.

It's a fact we've all got to face. Teenagers do drugs. Teenagers abuse alcohol. It is usually a horrible experience for the whole family. And it can ruin so many chances at having a successful launching experience into adulthood. All of that is absolutely true and worthy of our attention, awareness, and response.

But we as parents have to absolutely commit to a principle more powerful than drugs. First, Do No Harm. Emotional reactivity has the amazing ability of creating the very outcomes we were hoping to avoid in the first place.

Whenever we give in to our anxiety we begin to violate our own principles. Like respecting our children as individuals with a mind (and life) of their own. Like invading their privacy because we cannot handle the anxiety of not knowing what they may be involved in. And then we pore through their things and start to interrogate them, which motivates them to work even harder to hide from us. I've seen it happen over and over again in my practice, and I hear about it time and again at my conferences.

We, however, are not responsible for our kids and their choices—they are. We can do everything “right” as parents, and do it all very calmly, and they can still choose to wreck their life. That is their birthright as individuals. As *ScreamFree* as I'm trying to be, my kids can still choose their own self-destructive path. The more I can embrace this, the better off we will both be. That does not give me an excuse for retreating to some laid-back, aloof position, hoping that everything turns out alright. What it does is help me to be responsive, not reactive. What it helps me realize is that if I need them to behave a certain way in order to validate me as a parent, then I'm actually inviting them to do just the opposite. They need me to validate them as individuals with a certain freedom, and responsibility, in my home. I cannot do that as long as I need them to validate me. And neither can you.