

RESPECTFUL PARENTS Respectful Kids

7 Keys to Turn Family Conflict Into Co-operation

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Chapter 1

Respect & Co-operation: What Parents Want and How to Get It

Respect and co-operation are high on the list of what parents tell us they want from their kids. Perhaps you are among the many parents who have an automatic voice alarm that periodically goes off in the midst of an argument and says, *I really want more respect and co-operation from these kids!* Perhaps you are among the many parents who wonder what in the world is going on to prevent you from getting the respect and co-operation you want. After all that you do for your kids, aren't these simple things to ask for? Well, yes—and no. Respect and co-operation are simple because they are basic needs you have. On the other hand, setting up the conditions to get them requires more attention than you might think.

We have found that you can tap into a flow of mutual respect and co-operation if you are willing to do the following:

- Remember that your children learn what you are living.
- Co-operate with your children.
- Value your needs and your children's needs equally.
- Look at your assumptions about children.
- Develop and practice the 7 keys that are at the core of respectful parenting.

What would happen if even one generation were raised with respect and without violence?

—Gloria Steinem

Though moms and dads talk a lot about respect and co-operation, we find that confusion surrounding the terms is rampant. When asked, parents aren't quite sure what they mean each time they use the words; they can even mean different things at different times. And, to top it off, the ways parents go about trying to get respect and co-operation often backfire because they haven't been able to show their kids either respect or co-operation—at least in the way this book presents the terms.

Co-operation Is a Two-Way Street

It turns out that many parents, instead of thinking of co-operation as a two-way working relationship with their kids, think of it as a one-way street where kids do what parents want them to do. When kids don't do what is expected, they are called *uncooperative*, and from that point on the situation can easily turn into name-calling, criticizing, blaming, arguing, and fighting. Later attempts to patch things up often resort to compromises, negotiations, and bargaining, which rarely meet anybody's needs fully.



Explore for Yourself

What does the word *co-operate* mean to you?

Have you ever said something to your child like the following? *Your room is a mess; I want you to clean it up before you go to the game.* Have you then wondered why she didn't do what she was told to do, right away and with a smile? You made a unilateral decision, and she was expected to carry it out according to your time frame and standards. Because, *After all, I'm the parent!* This attitude, however, fails to consider the child's point of view. When you neglect to consider your child's thoughts, feelings, needs, and possible solutions to getting the room cleaned, you do so at the risk of losing her respect and goodwill. Your child's grumbling resistance is, in effect, a natural consequence of your choice to operate without her input.

The *co-* in *co-operate* means *together*, as in co-creator, co-author, and co-worker. *Oper* means *to work*, so *co-operate* means *to work together*. True co-operation is not something you can mandate. When there is no *togetherness* in the operation of a home—as in mutual agreement about rules that affect a child’s life as well as mutual problem solving and decision making—then you can expect the following natural consequences: resistance, arguments, hurt feelings, battles of will, and reliance on punishments and rewards. A fundamental law of human relations is: No *co-* in the household operations leads to resistance, which leads to punishments and rewards to force compliance, which leads to further resistance, and so forth. Parents who leave out the *co-* in their household operations are destined to reap the consequences of this omission. If you aren’t working with your children, they aren’t going to want to work with you.

A young woman shared this story with us: Her father used to make her clean her room to very strict specifications; he even lifted up the edge of the carpet in an otherwise clean room and punished her if she had failed to sweep up a few crumbs. The more he insisted that things be done his way, the more she was filled with hostility and resistance. She cleaned her room because she was afraid of her father and feared what would happen if she didn’t. It was cleaned with spite rather than the desire to co-operate and contribute to the smooth functioning of the home.

How different might this situation have been if she and her father had agreed upon standards together? If she had been included in deciding whether or not the room was clean?

**Together we
can be wiser
than any of us
can be alone.
We need to
know how
to tap that
wisdom.**

—Tom Atlee



Explore for Yourself

How might you be leaving out the *co-* in your household operations?

If you are leaving the *co-* out of your operations, what are the consequences of your actions?

List at least one thing you can do to contribute to co-operation in your home.

Co-operation Is a Survival Skill

Co-operation is a goal for parents—something they would like more of, more often. It's also a skill to develop. In order to sustain itself and thrive, every species on the planet has to learn this skill. Our ability as humans to survive and thrive in an increasingly interconnected global society depends more and more upon learning and practicing the fine points of co-operation.

Human beings have been operating in a fiercely competitive mode for over ten thousand years¹—exerting power over others to gain tribal, national, or personal advantage. Power imbalances and disregard for the basic needs of millions of people, as well as the needs of nonhuman species and the earth itself, have resulted in ongoing conflicts, wars, and devastation. There are many economic, social, and ecological indicators that the way our species has been operating is unsustainable and a new mode of co-operating, or sharing power, is needed. As parents learn to foster co-operation in families, they become models of change for their children, for other parents, and for community members. They also become active participants in creating an evolutionary shift toward global peace and sustainability.

1. Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*; Sahtouris, *EarthDance*; Wink, *The Powers That Be*.

Co-operation—A Skill for Sustainability

According to evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris, co-operation is the only way toward sustainability. Mature ecosystems such as prairies and rainforests evolve when there is more co-operation than there is hostile competition. The highly complex ecosystem of the rainforest is a particularly vivid example of a mature system that has survived through millions of years because species learned to co-operate with each other. In the rainforest, “every species is fully employed, all work cooperatively while recycling all of their resources, and all products and services are distributed in such a way that every species remains healthy. *That* is sustainability.”¹

1. Sahtouris, “Skills for the Age of Sustainability,” 3.

People who live on family farms and in small communities need no reminder of the necessity for co-operation. Barn raisings, potlucks, and community harvests have been the norm for hundreds of years. However, those of us who live in more isolated family units are apt to forget that we all walk on the ground of interconnectedness. We can forget, that is, as long as things go smoothly—until something happens that affects the whole. When a major employer closes down business in a community, everyone feels the economic, social, and personal impact. In 2004, when a mountain slid down and covered several homes in the small town of La Conchita, California, those of us in neighboring towns felt the impact and got involved, rallying around families who lost homes and loved ones. And one year later when hurricanes Katrina and Rita brought floods that destroyed thousands of lives in New Orleans and other cities and towns in the southern United States, the whole country saw itself as one interconnected net of pain and personal, social, economic, and environmental concerns.

When the flow of community life is interrupted by natural or man-made crises—when survival is clearly at stake—something deep in us is

touched, and we are made aware of the ground of interconnectedness that supports us as a community and as a species. This recognition of our interdependence—that we are each a part of a vast web of life, and our well-being is intimately linked to the well-being of others—shows us why co-operation is a skill to develop, not only for harmony at home, but also for our survival as a human family.

Families are core units in our net of interdependence, and the impact of the relationships in your family will be felt for generations to come through the lives of your children and grandchildren. The way that you parent will affect not only your child, but the lives of hundreds and perhaps thousands of people in your child's future. You don't have a choice about whether or not to affect the net of interdependence; however, you do have a choice about *how* you affect it.

Co-operation Is Using Power *With* Your Kids

Consider that at every moment your interactions with your children are based on either exercising power *over* them or exercising power *with* them. You may be quite familiar with both kinds of interactions; very likely, one of these is predominant in your family life. Which is it?

Power-Over Parenting

Expressions of *power-over* parenting:

I want you to do this right now. If you don't . . .

Don't make me ask you again!

You just have to do what you're told.

No back talk from you!

I don't care what you think about it!

I know you want to play but you have to . . .

How many times do I have to tell you?

Building on a power-over foundation means that you determine what is best and right for your children, you give instructions, and you enforce your child's obedience. Parents with this orientation spend a lot of their time lecturing, advising, arguing, analyzing, and, in whatever ways, trying to manage the behavior of their children to fit a set of expectations they accept as the *right* and *only* way to do things. In their efforts to ensure compliance, parents often find themselves commanding and demanding, using phrases like *you have to*, *you must*, *you ought to*, and *you should*. They also have to enforce commands with threats of punishment and promises of rewards. Children have no choices or very few choices and are infrequently, if ever, asked for input to solve their own problems.

Power-With Parenting

Expressions of *power-with* parenting:

I'd like us to find a solution that works for everyone.

I'm happy when we work together.

I feel sad when one of us is left out of decisions.

I'd like to hear how this sounds to you.

I'm wondering what you need right now.

Would you be willing to . . . ?

Please help me understand what you have in mind.

I wonder what your thoughts are when you hear that.

Building on a power-with foundation means that parents and children co-operate to determine what is best for the children, actions are mutually agreed upon, and family members get together periodically to review agreements they have made. Parents with this orientation use precious parenting time actively listening to their kids and attempting to understand them by hearing their feelings, needs, and wishes. This parent's primary message is, *I want us to come up with strategies and solutions that*

The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.

—Simone Weil

Parenting takes place in a dynamic exchange among all members of a family. By living authentically in relation to one another, there is a sense of aliveness and joy that we do not have when we aim to teach, preach, or get others to do what we want.

—Joseph Chilton Pearce

work for all of us. I'm willing to explore with you until we can do that. Compromising, negotiating, and bargaining—where someone is usually left dissatisfied—are poor substitutes for getting to the roots of problems and meeting needs to everyone's satisfaction.

Parents determined to exercise power *with* their children are not afraid to listen to what their kids have to say. In fact, they welcome it. They realize that listening to children does not mean they agree or disagree with them. They know that listening is often just the beginning of a dialogue, and, especially if they listen first, they will have opportunities to honestly share their own thoughts, feelings, and needs as well.

Whether you are building on a power-over or a power-with foundation, your children are learning from everything you say and do. Kids pick up the tactics you are using and use them with their siblings and friends. They take these same tactics to school as their foundation for interactions with classmates, and they use them to build a foundation for their future relationships.

Respect Is a Way of Seeing

The good news is that willing co-operation between you and your child is not only possible, it is a natural consequence of a relationship where there is mutual respect. Respect, like co-operation, is often misunderstood and used in a variety of ways.

What do you mean when you say you want more respect from your children? Do you want them to be more willing to listen and learn from you? Do you want more understanding for your own circumstances and needs? Is it fewer arguments you want? Would you like your kids to see that your point of view is right? Do you mean you want admiration and high regard from your children? Or, do you want them to do what you say, no questions asked? Perhaps you mean all of the above. With so many different ways of understanding respect, is it any wonder that it is so difficult to ask for and get it? For most parents *respect* is a catch-all word that implies many thoughts, feelings, and needs.

Explore for Yourself



What does the word *respect* mean to you?

The core meaning of the word *respect* is *to look*. But to look at what? We propose that *to respect* another person is to look at what they are experiencing—in particular, to look with respect to their present feelings and needs.

When looking at your child, you can always choose your focus. You can look at their behavior from your point of view, from your desires and your judgments. Or you can look at them from their point of view, with respect to how they are feeling and what they need.

Focusing on Misbehavior

When you focus on what's wrong with a child, it can sound like this: *How could you be so careless? I thought you were more mature than that! What's wrong with you? You know better; you should be ashamed.*

When you focus on what's wrong with what your child did, it can sound like this: *That was a terrible thing to say. Look what you've done! You should know better!*

When your focus is clouded by your fears about what your children will do in the future, it can sound like this: *If you keep that up, you won't ever succeed. You're never going to make friends the way you're acting. When are you going to start listening to me?*

Parenting that focuses on what's wrong with children or what's wrong with their actions relies on a belief that scolding them, making them feel bad, and punishing them will motivate them to act differently. Does it work for you?

Focusing on Needs

No matter how crazy your child's actions may seem to you, from tugging on your pant leg to yelling, hitting you, hitting siblings, or throwing a toy, all that your child is trying to do at that moment is fulfill a need—a need that you have, too. Maybe the need is for attention, consideration, choice, or autonomy. You may not like the way your child is trying to meet his need, but you will have the best chance of connecting with him—and also of helping him find a better way—if you recognize the need he's sincerely trying to meet at that moment.

The dad in the following story was elated to find he could focus on his son's needs rather than react to his behavior. Two months into the start of middle school, twelve-year-old Jason was putting on weight. His parents stocked the house with healthy foods but knew that he was snacking on chips and candy at school and on the weekends. His parents didn't want to put additional pressure on him by saying something, but one night Jason said angrily, *I can't believe I'm so fat!* His dad reports that his first inclination was to lecture Jason: *Look, if you'd just lay off the junk food you'd lose weight.* He was proud of the fact that he kept quiet instead, hoping to hear more from Jason about what was going on with him. Sure enough, Jason continued, *I know it's all the junk I'm eating, but I can't stay away from it. I crave it after school and it's everywhere I go.* Dad empathized with Jason by guessing his feelings and needs: *Sounds like you're feeling kind of stuck right now? You'd like to find another way to let off steam and relax besides eating fatty foods? At the moment you don't know what that could be?* Tears welled up in Jason's eyes as his anger toward himself shifted to sadness. *Yeah, Dad, I've got to do something!* Dad empathized again: *You sound pretty motivated to change some habits.* Jason replied, *I am, Dad. Do you have any ideas?*

Like most parents would, this dad jumped at his son's invitation to share his opinions and discuss ideas about what his son could do to meet his needs in healthier ways.

Co-operation Is In Our Genes

The idea that co-operation is a necessity for life to survive and thrive, and that it is part of our genetic wiring, is put forth by both scientists and spiritual leaders.

A natural instinct among animals to co-operate for mutual well-being has been reported by biologists Tim Roper and Larissa Conradt. In their study *Group Decision-Making in Animals*, they conclude that the natural state of all group-living animals, including humans, is co-operation, not domination. They maintain that Nature has endowed humans with a biofeedback system that includes the release of endorphins, and joyful feelings, when we give to one another.¹ These feelings motivate us to continue to give, and thereby to contribute to the survival of the species and more: the thriving or all-around well-being of each of us.

Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, also claims that co-operation is a natural response in humans because we are social creatures, and our survival and well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of others. The impulse to give to others and to co-operate with them for mutual well-being is, thus, grounded in our nature. In his words, “interdependence is a fundamental law of nature. Not only higher forms of life but also many of the smallest insects are social beings who, without any religion, law, or education, survive by mutual cooperation based on an innate recognition of their interconnectedness.”²

A working definition of co-operation that emerges from these perspectives is this: *Co-operation is a way of engaging in power with others for mutual well-being.*

1. Roper and Conradt, “Group Decision-Making in Animals.”

2. Gyatso, “Compassion and the Individual,” <http://www.john-bauer.com/dalai-lama.htm> (accessed January 17, 2006).