



DELAWARE MODERN PEDIATRICS, P.A.

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Spoiling

No one enjoys a “spoiled” child. The behavior is unpleasant to be around, and it might reflect badly on the parents.

But what does it really mean to be “spoiled”?

For example, imagine that a child asks an adult: “May I please have a cookie?”

If the adult says, “Certainly, sweetheart, here’s a cookie,” I don’t worry that this child is being spoiled.

But suppose the adult says, “No, sweetheart, it’s almost suppertime, you can’t have a cookie.” If the child then whines or throws a screaming temper tantrum, and then the adult says, “All right, stop crying! Here’s a cookie,” then I would be concerned about “spoiling.”

If a child has learned that he can make the adults change a rule, against their better judgment, because they can’t face the crying, I call that “spoiling.” So here is the behavioral principle to avoid spoiling:

- It’s OK to cry about a rule. (In fact, it’s ok for the child to cry at the top of her lungs for several hours about a rule.)
- But it’s NOT ok for the crying to change the rule.

Small infants can learn “spoiled” behavior at just a few months of age. So it’s important to demonstrate predictable, consistent parenting from the start. With small infants, the dilemma usually presents itself when the infant cries to be picked up, or to be fed. Years ago, families solved the dilemma by feeding on a strict schedule, or by not picking babies up when they cried. This does prevent spoiling, but I think it’s better to teach a baby to trust that its needs will be met rapidly.

So, when the baby cries, it’s best for parents to decide immediately if they will hold or feed their baby on demand (often the best choice), or (if the baby just needs to fuss itself to sleep) to let the baby cry. But don’t try letting the baby cry for a while, then cave in when you run out of patience. Pick a plan, then stick to it.

For older children, we all know that consistent, predictable parenting is best. Spoiled children, who know that the rules can change if enough irritation is applied to a parent, are created by inconsistent parenting.

What is the principle that guides the avoidance of spoiling? As parents, we are responsible for our children's health, safety, feeding, family values, and so on. But here's the surprise: we are NOT responsible for our children's emotional state. If a child is crying, this does not imply that a parent has made an error, or that the parent should feel guilty. If you know that you have set an appropriate rule, your child may not be happy about the rule; but enforcing the rule is best for the child.

This is not to say that all rules should be enforced blindly and rigidly. An older child may (sometimes rightly) question the wisdom of a rule. An enlightened parent may reasonably say, "You know, I hadn't thought about it that way – maybe we should reconsider." It is ok for a parent to show to a child that she is willing to re-evaluate a rule, and on occasion even reverse it. This does not show weakness; in fact, it strengthens your hand farther down the road when you enforce other rules, because you have demonstrated that you truly believe in the wisdom of the rules that you do enforce. But if you reverse a rule, it should be because you have reconsidered the value of the rule, not because you feel guilty about the child's reaction.