

# Blind Obedience in Families Can Be Unhealthy

by Dean Walker

*“I couldn’t believe it! I sounded exactly like my mother!”*

**H**ow many times do we catch ourselves, as parents, saying or doing things that our parents said or did to us as children—things we hated and perhaps had sworn never to do or say when we became parents?

Often enough, probably, to illustrate how powerfully our own parents have shaped our unconscious attitudes about children and child rearing. Often enough to make us realize the importance of examining the process and becoming aware of some of the resulting attitudes.

Ask, “Should children obey parents without question?” Most younger children (4-9) will say “yes” and are very sure that it is never OK to say “no” to an adult, especially a parent. Even when the topic is sex abuse prevention, it is difficult to get children to say and really believe that it is sometimes important to say “no” to an authority figure.

I am certain that children answer “yes” to the question of blind obedience whether or not a parent has actually said to them, “You must obey me without question.” Children get the message loud and clear, because parents act as if it were true. The attitude passes directly—untested—from the unconscious of one generation into the next.

Older children (10-18), operating on a more conscious level, will much more frequently say “no” to the question. It is their developmental task to consciously challenge the notion of obedience. The teen years will be particularly trying for parents who have not consciously examined their attitudes about appropriate parent/child relationships.

Still the unconscious attitude that children should obey without question is essentially untouched by the conscious rebellion of adolescence. Add a few years and the birth of a child, and the attitude comes to life once again as new parents are tested by the behavior of their real-life children.

Do these individuals now consciously answer “yes” to the strict obedience question? Sometimes—even to the point of recommending physical pain as a remedy for childish defiance. Even in the absence of a conscious “yes,” an unconscious “yes” often becomes apparent in the overblown anger elicited by the behavior of a child who is doing her or his developmental task of separating from parents and growing up.

That second, deep-seated “yes” is by far the most powerful because it represents an attitude, what we really think, and so controls our behavior. It also shapes the attitudes our children will have when they grow up, unless our children do the hard work of consciously changing those attitudes.

Here are three other attitudes that I have discovered in myself and others that also led to parental anger and misbehavior:

**1. My child’s misbehavior is a personal challenge**, not just to my authority as a parent but to my worth and integrity as well. I must, therefore, win out against all challenges.

This attitude leads to countless power struggles and can result in a cycle of parent and child anger that seriously damages the relationship. It would be fruitful to work to replace this attitude with a different one: I don't have to take my child's misbehavior personally. Winning is less important than helping to create a relationship in which the needs of the situation take precedence over any one person's will.

**2. My children's performance (especially in public) is a direct reflection on me.** I am a failure if my children misbehave.

Look for lots of guilt to accompany this attitude. And a lot of pressure on both parent and child to be perfect, especially in the eyes of others. This raises the potential for hurt feelings, blowups and a belief in conditional self-worth: "I am only good if I am perfect."

A more healthful attitude might be: Children, like adults, are individuals, with their own inborn temperament and their own preferences. They can and will make decisions based on their individuality that have little or nothing to do with the parent. We cannot hope to and should not seek to exert control over every aspect of their lives. We can hope to influence our children with clear and firm limits, good communication and good modeling. This is a long-term, developmental process that requires patience and room for lots of mistakes—even in public.

**3. Life should be a smooth sail.** I should not have problems, at least none that are too difficult. My children should understand that.

Ferret out this attitude whenever we react with inordinate or long-lasting anger to any difficulty, whether there are children around or not. Tongue lashings or other parental misbehavior that our children suffer when they make mistakes that create problems for us can dim their self-esteem and distance them from us. Fortunately, children are quick to forgive. Quicker, often, than we are in asking for it (especially if one of our attitudes insists that parents must always be right.)

This is the real situation. Life is a struggle. And then you die (just kidding). Expect to meet obstacles and difficulties every day. Our personal growth is a result of dealing with these as best we can. Most importantly, where our children are concerned, their challenges are our opportunities for growth.

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