

Tips for Parents: Helping Gifted Children Be Smart About Dealing with Authority

This Tips for Parents article is from a seminar hosted by Eileen Kennedy-Moore, PhD., who provides advice on helping gifted students deal with authority figures.

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Learning to deal with authority figures effectively and with diplomacy is a necessary life skill, but some gifted children struggle with this. Because they tend to focus on what they believe is “Right” (with a capital R!), they may be blind to hierarchy and unintentionally offend or defiantly argue with adults. Or, at the other extreme, they may be unreasonably fearful of displeasing adults.

Sometimes the wisest course is to comply with authority out of concern for the greater good, deference to the authority’s greater knowledge or experience, or simple recognition of the reality of a hierarchical organization.

On the other hand, some of our greatest heroes are people who have stood up to tyrants or challenged the status quo. However, it’s best to do this with deliberate intention, guided by our convictions, and with our eyes open to the consequences, rather than out of habit or obliviousness.

Some authorities are definitely easier to deal with than others. Gifted children tend to do well with authorities who don’t feel threatened by their knowledge or questions and can engage their problem-solving skills, but who also encourage perspective taking and respect for others.

Gifted kids tend to see themselves as equal to—or even superior to—the adults in charge of them. This often creates problems for them, because the adults definitely don’t see things that way! For example, publicly and forcefully correcting a teacher is unlikely to yield a positive response. There are polite and not-so-polite ways to challenge authority, and sometimes, out of kindness or civility, it’s okay to let something slide. Being “right” is no excuse for being unkind. Overlooking minor errors is an act of generosity. If the error is central, bringing up the matter privately or commenting gently, with an attitude of sharing rather than correcting, are good options.

Beyond managing the urge to correct, gifted children also need to be aware of what “the boss” wants. While our children might argue “He shouldn’t care...” or “I shouldn’t have to...” the facts may tell a different story. Ask your child: “What have you noticed about what does or doesn’t please the teacher?”, “What does the grading rubric tell you about what the teacher thinks is most important in this project?”, and “Why is it wise to try to stay on the teacher’s good side?” The answers to this latter question range from the pragmatic to the prosocial.

Our modeling will also influence our children’s attitudes towards teachers and other adults. If they hear us criticizing or belittling a teacher, our children will take this as carte blanche to disrespect that teacher. As much as possible, we want to treat our children’s teachers with respect and enlist them as allies.

Another important way to help gifted children learn to deal with authority figures is by exercising compassionate authority as their parents. This involves avoiding unnecessary power struggles but also providing the guidance and limits that our children need.

We want to be “good bosses” to our kids. We’ve all had good and bad bosses: Good bosses are the ones who help us do it right; bad bosses are the ones who yell at us after we mess up. Good bosses will listen to our thoughtful and politely expressed suggestions, but they're still the final arbitrator, and they don't put up with endless argument or delay.

Gifted children (and most of us!) often find it easier to comply if we give a reason, but sometimes they need to listen even if they don't agree with the reason. When possible, we can try to give a choice between two acceptable alternatives ("Do you want to take your shower before or after dinner?") or even offer, “Let’s do it together.” If we have to insist on something our child doesn't like, it often helps to at least acknowledge our child's feelings. "It's hard for you when..." "You wish..."

Be very wary of trying to “make up for” the behavior of your child’s other parent. This is impossible and destructive. Family dynamics involving “The Nice Parent vs. The Mean Parent” or “The Competent Parent vs. The Inept Parent” teach children that they don’t have to listen to anyone.

Dealing with authority is complicated. It can be challenging even for adults. Blind obedience isn't the answer, and neither is knee-jerk defiance or self-absorbed insolence. As parents, we can help our gifted children make thoughtful choices about how they navigate their relationships with those in charge.

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