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Am I a Spoiler Parent?

Does This Sound Like You?

My client, Jack, is very upset. He is sitting in my office telling me his story, and it's one that I hear over and over.

My married daughter calls. It's an emergency. "Could you and Mom please come for dinner tonight?" She will cook. I just need to drive the 120 miles in rush hour traffic. I rearrange my plans for the evening, run the dizzying list of possible horrors that could have happened through my mind, and make a mental note to stop for gas on the way. My daughter is twenty-eight, been married for three years, her family's income is north of \$200,000, she just had my first grandchild six months ago and as far as I know the marriage is good. The waiting is agony, but she would not discuss the emergency on the phone except to say that nobody's sick.

Pleasantries have barely been exchanged before my daughter can stand it no longer. She is in obvious distress and decides to just come straight to the point. "Daddy," she wails, "Aidan's preschool is

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going to cost \$25,000, and we don't have the money to pay for it."

I sit quietly, thinking that the bad news is still coming. I feel empathy because my daughter is in pain, but I'm still trying to connect that level of distress with the news she just delivered. Tragedy is in the eye of the beholder, but Aidan hasn't even started to crawl or cut a tooth and the last I checked, annual tuition at a decent university is less than \$25,000. While trying to clear the confusion in my head, I notice that my daughter, son-in-law and wife are all looking at me expectantly. I wonder, do they actually think that this is where I pull out my checkbook and console my daughter for this injustice with cash?

As I listen to Jack's story, I struggle with my own mixed emotions. First, because it didn't happen to me, it is almost funny. Here we have a married woman and mother who is apparently incapable of distinguishing between a want and a need. Her sense of entitlement is so enormous that she doesn't hesitate to ask Daddy and Mommy to pay the preschool tuition bill. And what kind of man did she marry who would just sit there silently while his wife pleads financial hardship to her parents to solve this kind of a problem?

Second, the story is incredibly sad. Here's Jack, whose household income is about half of his daughter's; he is having his own debt issues, is less than ten years from retirement, and will probably be working long past the time when he should have been able to step away from the daily grind. He is still giving money to his adult children just because they ask. In trying to give them everything they want and make them happy, he has crippled them. With the best of intentions, he has taught them that they are entitled to instant gratification and that they don't have to solve their own problems.

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My job here is to help my client. I have been working with Jack for over a year, trying to help him understand that he shouldn't still be financially supporting his three children – who are all college graduates – both for his sake and for theirs. I would like to take all the credit for making progress with him by helping him to understand how important it was that he refused to write a check for the tuition on the spot; but his daughter helped me out by making a request so outrageous that, for the first time, Jack didn't immediately comply. Now he's starting to get angry. The smaller amounts didn't seem like such a big deal, but this latest request has him feeling taken for granted. I spend the next half hour helping him understand that it's all connected. How could he think that he could constantly give in to her demands for the smaller stuff, and that she would be mature enough not to ask for the bigger stuff?

I ask Jack some key questions: What would it have meant to his family if he had recognized the entitlement monster when his girl was very young? Would she now be more independent and resourceful? Is this affecting her happiness, because she always wants more than she can provide for herself? And how is this going to affect Aidan, his granddaughter?

The role-modeling Jack provided is not the kind he wants to see repeated with another generation. Jack is starting to realize that he is now facing the crux of the entitlement issue. We all would love to have our cake and eat it too. However, for every entitled person taking a short cut, someone else has to pay the bill, carry the weight, or take up the slack. He now recognizes the entitlement issue is the problem and is ready to tackle it head-on.

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Recognize and Acknowledge the Problem

Jack was very resistant to the idea that his children were entitled, and until his daughter asked for the \$25,000, he was still not facing the truth. He tended to minimize the degree of his daughter's entitlement, rationalizing that only the children who threw screaming fits, acted disrespectfully to their parents and had trouble in school were the ones who really had the problem.

The reality is, Jack is what I like to call a "spoiler parent." Although intensity and specifics vary greatly, all spoiler parents have three characteristics in common. These parents partially or completely relinquish their power to the child, expect too little from the child, and allow personal issues to interfere with effective parenting.

Jack's own childhood was harsh and without luxury. When his daughter was born, his goal was to make life easier for her than what he had experienced. To protect himself from his own discomfort, he shielded her from frustration and gave her privileges she did not earn.

Like Jack, every parent who is dealing with an entitled child has to go through an awakening process before the problem can be addressed. However, no parent wants to admit that their child behaves in an entitled manner or that their own mistakes created the problem.

Until you are clear what the issue is and are willing to acknowledge it, you cannot correct it. If you are reading this book, you may have the sense that something is wrong and you need to do something about it. If you are still having difficulty acknowledging that your child has an entitlement issue, see if you can identify with one of the common reasons other parents have also struggled.

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Roadblocks to Recognizing Spoiler Behavior

- 1) Lack of knowledge or clarity about what entitled behavior looks like
- 2) Reluctance to acknowledge or even consider the problem due to personal issues or baggage, including fear and guilt
- 3) Minimizing the degree of the behaviors and therefore rationalizing that they don't need to be addressed
- 4) Reluctance to acknowledge the problem because admitting it means that something needs to be done that the parent is not willing or equipped to handle
- 5) Reluctance to acknowledge the problem in an effort to avoid admitting that the parent has made mistakes and caused the child pain as a result

If you identify with one of these roadblocks, I'm glad you are here. We will address each of these in detail as we go through the journey from spoiler to disciplined parent. At this point, just acknowledging the problem and making the commitment to move forward is all you need to do.

What Are the Signs of a Spoiler Parent?

You may be asking, "What does a spoiler parent look like, and how will I know if that's me?" No one has an exhaustive list, and there are qualities that would seem opposite that actually have the same effect. For example, an overprotective parent who never lets a child experience disappointment or frustration can create an entitled child, just as an over-permissive parent can. If you are struggling with the entitlement monster, you will most likely identify with at

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least one of the traits below:

- 1) Your discipline is inconsistent
- 2) You crave your child's approval
- 3) You are overprotective
- 4) You get frustrated often and respond to your child in a reactive manner
- 5) You are overindulgent
- 6) You are weak
- 7) You are afraid to let your child make mistakes or experience consequences of his actions
- 8) You make decisions based on personal fear or guilt versus what is best for your child
- 9) You rescue your child from his own mistakes
- 10) You expect too little from your child
- 11) You are over-permissive

Spoiling Can Happen At Any Age

It doesn't matter how old your child is. Spoiler parenting behavior can begin at any stage. Even if you have successfully negotiated the terrible twos, you still have the potential to spoil your child. Some parents are rock solid on setting limits and being consistent with their toddlers, and then start to falter once their child builds vocabulary and learns to charm and cast spells. This is not evil or deliberately manipulative behavior; it's how your child tests boundaries, and your response teaches him how to behave. Being blinded by the cuteness haze is understandable, but not in the best interest of your child; and if you don't catch it in the early stages, you will spoil him.

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Other parents lose it at the teenage phase. Let's face it, we all lose it at some point when dealing with teenagers. But consistently losing it and giving in to your teenager will not prepare him for a world that doesn't really care how bright and funny and handsome he is if he's behaving in a self-centered, lazy or disrespectful way.

Whatever stage of the game, the problem doesn't really seem to be a problem at first glance. You want your child to be happy and protected from danger, pain and disappointment. Nothing wrong with that. Period. What's the difficulty, then? Just make sure he has everything he wants, when he wants it, in the amount he wants, whether it's good for him or not – oh, wait, this isn't sounding so good anymore. And, how do you feel when he is metaphorically opening his beak and waiting to be fed pre-digested worms in your nest at the age of thirty-two, with a child of his own that also wants to be fed?

That's why you can't just protect your child and make sure he doesn't experience frustration and pain. If you do, he will learn to expect handouts that the world isn't going to give him. Not that pain or frustration are good, but he needs to experience them to learn how to deal with them and make good choices for himself. You can't be there to save him all the time when he's a child, and your ability to always be there declines as he grows. Once he's an adult, you won't want to be there constantly to save him – trust me on this, even if it seems like a good idea while you're still dazed with cuteness.

It helps to understand that you can't possibly be an umbrella over him for his entire life, and that the best way to protect him as much as you can is to prepare him to protect himself. If you have raised or are raising an entitled child, you are loving him so much that you are hurting him.

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You Have to Fix Yourself, Not Your Child

If you find yourself asking, “Why does my child make outrageous demands, create havoc, act disrespectful, get easily frustrated and seem always to be taking the easy way out?” here’s the answer: you taught him.

You taught him to expect you to bail him out and make his life easy. Now you’re not happy with the results of that strategy. He has missed out on developing some important life skills, and the sad truth is that he is not really happy, either. Nothing is going to change if you simply tell him to behave differently, because your child doesn’t believe you. Nothing terrible is going to happen if he doesn’t get a job and take responsibility for himself, because you have always taken care of him – and, in his mind, you always will.

The good news is that you created it; you can fix it. Here’s the catch – and you knew there was going to be one – you have to fix you, not your child. There are different strategies that you will need to use depending on the age of your child, but it’s never too early and never too late to cure the entitlement monster. Your child, no matter his age, will learn what you have to teach as long as you have a serviceable parent-child relationship. You need to teach differently. To be able to do that, you need to change your way of thinking. You provide the will, and this book will help with the way.

Forgive Yourself

The path begins with you. The most important step is to forgive yourself. You did not intend to create an entitled child. Instead, your motivation has been to make sure your child is loved and cared for.

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No excuses are necessary. The sooner you can forgive yourself, the sooner you can move forward and change. If you were raised as an entitled child, you may need to forgive your parents. They are not responsible for what has happened in your home, but not having a good role model certainly made your path more difficult.

You have the power to un-spoil. Frustrated parents often underestimate their power. Your efforts at curbing entitled behavior may not be working, but that only means that the methods are not working, not that you don't have tremendous ability to influence your child. You'll need to be free from guilt and fear to do so. We're all responsible for what we've done to our children, even the fantastic things. This is not the time to feel guilty about everything, but rather the time to focus on what you can change and make better.

Okay, I Need to Change, but How?

Your child was not born spoiled. Most parents struggling with entitled children know this on some level, but it's still hard to hear and even harder to accept. It's difficult to acknowledge that you started with a baby so full of promise and, often with the best of intentions, have ended up with a demanding, ungrateful, needy person.

But this not about your child. This is all about you. You need to spend some time, get very honest with yourself and figure out what it is about you that needs to change. Is it feeling guilt or fear, being overwhelmed, not having the correct tools or a combination of all those things that has contributed to your parenting in a way that has created an entitled child?

The truth is that your decisions and parenting have provided

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fertile ground for the entitlement monster to grow and flourish. You have created something that is the exact opposite of what you intended. Your decisions have hurt your child, but you can make new decisions that will help him now. You need to be his parent, not his friend. Parents love unconditionally, are willing to make great sacrifices and unselfishly use their time and talents to provide for their children. Why would you want to just be your child's friend when you could be so much more – his parent?

You can make new decisions. You can change yourself. You have the power to be a different kind of parent to your child. This is about you, because the only person you can change is yourself. You can't change your child. He's going to be influenced by the changes you make. Depending on how old he is now, he will be able to develop the skills he needs to be more grateful and self-reliant quickly or more slowly; but he's in charge of himself, just as you're in charge of you. This is about you, and you will need to remember that because there will be plenty of frustrating moments. You have to change what you can control and trust that the decisions you are making will be of ultimate benefit to your child. If you "fixed" your child and didn't change your parenting, you would just re-spoil him. If you fix yourself and he's still a minor, he has a chance to learn what he needs to be enchanting. If he's an adult, he'll learn that you still love him but aren't going to enable his entitled behavior anymore, which will hopefully give him the spark he needs to begin making some positive changes of his own.

It Won't Be Easy, but It Will Be Worth It

Now that you have recognized that you are a spoiler parent, you may be experiencing some painful and overwhelming emotions