

The Life-Draining Power of the Empty Threat

It was happening two lines over from where I stood in line waiting to pay for my groceries. A mother was yelling at her child. "Behave, or I will whip you," she said for the fourth time. "That's it. I'm never bringing you out of the house again! You can just sit home alone while the rest of us go out."

Nothing changed in the boy's behavior. In fact, his disobedience elevated. He knew the sound of empty threats. (I will set aside commenting on yelling, "I will whip you" to a child for another time, but right now, I want to comment on the poor parenting.) You see, he knew his mother didn't mean what she was saying.

Mean what you say—say what you mean.

Numerous times, I have heard a parent start "the count." You know what I'm talking about. "I am going to count to three. If you don't behave by the time I count to three, you're going to be in real trouble!"

And then "One ... two ... three." Nothing. "I really mean it!"

It seems the only punishment the child will face if he doesn't correct his behavior is the annoyance of listening to his parent repeatedly count to three.

Mean what you say—say what you mean.

The problem is the child is actually doing a better job of parental training than the parent. The child knows the family history. Repeatedly, they have witnessed a parent who threatens but does not follow through.

They are being nurtured by a person who does not mean what

they say.

Part of the development of a child is establishing his limits. When parents don't mean what they say and don't say what they mean, those limits are confused.

Frustration mounts as well, and parents can tend to up the ante into ridiculous empty threats and punishments they will not follow through on.

"Eat your carrots or you will not be served another meal in this house."

"Clean your room, or I will give all your clothes to charity."

"If you're not dressed in five minutes, we're all going to leave without you."

Uttering empty threats is easy for frustrated parents. At times, we underestimate how smart our children are. They know the parent won't—and often times can't—follow through with those threats.

Ridiculous and empty threats should not be enacted, but the lack of follow-through is telling a child he will have freedom to do as he pleases. A good parent is careful not to make any discipline promises they have no intention of fulfilling.

Children believe what we do far more than what we say, so mean what you say—and then follow through on it. {eoa}

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This article originally appeared at