

# 7 Crippling Parenting Behaviors That Keep Children From Growing Into Leaders

By Kathy Caprino

While I spend my professional time now as a career success coach, writer, and leadership trainer, I was a marriage and family therapist in my past, and worked for several years with couples, families, and children. Through that experience, I witnessed a very wide array of both functional and dysfunctional parenting behaviors. As a parent myself, I've learned that all the wisdom and love in the world doesn't necessarily protect you from parenting in ways that hold your children back from thriving, gaining independence and becoming the leaders they have the potential to be.

I was intrigued, then, to catch up with leadership expert [Dr. Tim Elmore](#) and learn more about how we as parents are failing our children today — coddling and crippling them — and keeping them from becoming leaders they are destined to be. Tim is a best-selling author of more than 25 books, including [Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future](#), [Artificial Maturity: Helping Kids Meet the Challenges of Becoming Authentic Adults](#), and the [Habitudes®](#) series. He is Founder and President of [Growing Leaders](#), an organization dedicated to mentoring today's young people to become the leaders of tomorrow. Tim had this to share about the 7 damaging parenting behaviors that keep children from becoming leaders – of their own lives and of the world's enterprises:

## **1. We don't let our children experience risk**

We live in a world that warns us of danger at every turn. The “safety first” preoccupation enforces our fear of losing our kids, so we do everything we can to protect them. It's our job after all, but we have insulated them from healthy risk-taking behavior and it's had an adverse effect. [Psychologists in Europe](#) have discovered that if a child doesn't play outside and is never allowed to experience a skinned knee, they frequently have phobias as adults. Kids need to fall a few times to learn it's normal; teens likely need to break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend to appreciate the emotional maturity that lasting relationships require. If parents remove risk from children's lives, we will likely experience high arrogance and low self-esteem in our growing leaders.

## **2. We rescue too quickly**

Today's generation of young people has not developed some of the life skills kids did 30 years ago because adults swoop in and take care of problems for them. When we rescue too quickly and over-indulge our children with “assistance,” we remove the need for them to navigate

hardships and solve problems on their own. It's parenting for the short-term and it sorely misses the point of leadership—to equip our young people to do it without help. Sooner or later, kids get used to someone rescuing them: “If I fail or fall short, an adult will smooth things over and remove any consequences for my misconduct.” When in reality, this isn't even remotely close to how the world works, and therefore it disables our kids from becoming competent adults.

### **3. We rave too easily**

The self-esteem movement has been around since Baby Boomers were kids, but it took root in our school systems in the 1980s. Attend a little league baseball game and you'll see that everyone is a winner. This “everyone gets a trophy” mentality might make our kids feel special, but research is now indicating this method has unintended consequences. Kids eventually observe that Mom and Dad are the only ones who think they're awesome when no one else is saying it. They begin to doubt the objectivity of their parents; it feels good in the moment, but it's not connected to reality. When we rave too easily and disregard poor behavior, children eventually learn to cheat, exaggerate and lie, and to avoid difficult reality. They have not been conditioned to face it.

### **4. We let guilt get in the way of leading well**

Your child does not have to love you every minute. Your kids will get over the disappointment, but they won't get over the effects of being spoiled. So tell them “no” or “not now,” and let them fight for what they really value and *need*. As parents, we tend to give them what they want when rewarding our children, especially with multiple kids. When one does well in something, we feel it's unfair to praise and reward that one and not the other. This is unrealistic and misses an opportunity to enforce the point to our kids that success is dependent upon our own actions and good deeds. Be careful not to teach them a good grade is rewarded by a trip to the mall. If your relationship is based on material rewards, kids will experience neither intrinsic motivation nor unconditional love.

### **5. We don't share our past mistakes**

Healthy teens are going to want to spread their wings and they'll need to try things on their own. We as adults must let them, but that doesn't mean we can't help them navigate these waters. Share with them the relevant mistakes you made when you were their age in a way that helps them learn to make good choices. (Avoid negative “lessons learned” having to do with smoking, alcohol, illegal drugs, etc.) Also, kids must prepare to encounter slip-ups and face the consequences of their decisions. Share how you felt when you faced a similar experience, what drove your actions, and the resulting lessons learned. Because we're not the only influence on our kids, we must be the best influence.

## **6. We mistake intelligence, giftedness and influence for maturity**

*Intelligence* is often used as a measurement of a child's maturity, and as a result parents assume an intelligent child is ready for the world. That's not the case. Some professional athletes and Hollywood starlets, for example, possess unimaginable talent, but still get caught in a public scandal. Just because giftedness is present in one aspect of a child's life, don't assume it pervades all areas. There is no magic "age of responsibility" or a proven guide as to when a child should be given specific freedoms, but a good rule of thumb is to observe other children the same age as yours. If you notice that they are doing more themselves than your child does, you may be delaying your child's independence.

## **7. We don't practice what we preach**

As parents, it is our responsibility to model the life we want our children to live. To help them lead a life of character and become dependable and accountable for their words and actions. As the leaders of our homes, we can start by only speaking honest words – white lies will surface and slowly erode character. Watch yourself in the little ethical choices that others might notice, because your kids will notice too. If you don't cut corners, for example, they will know it's not acceptable for them to either. Show your kids what it means to give selflessly and joyfully by volunteering for a service project or with a community group. Leave people and places better than you found them, and your kids will take note and do the same.

*Why do parents engage in these behaviors (what are they afraid of if they don't)? Do these behaviors come from fear or from poor understanding of what strong parenting (with good boundaries) is?*

Tim shares:

"I think both fear and lack of understanding play a role here, but it leads with the fact that each generation of parents is usually compensating for something the previous generation did. The primary adults in kids' lives today have focused on now rather than later. It's about their happiness today not their readiness tomorrow. I suspect it's a reaction. Many parents today had Moms and Dads who were all about getting ready for tomorrow: saving money, not spending it, and getting ready for retirement. In response, many of us bought into the message: embrace the moment. You deserve it. Enjoy today. And we did. For many, it resulted in credit card debt and the inability to delay gratification. This may be the crux of our challenge. The truth is parents who are able to focus on tomorrow, not just today, produce better results."

*How can parents move away from these negative behaviors (without having to hire a family therapist to help)?*

Tim says: "It's important for parents to become exceedingly self-aware of their words and actions when interacting with their children, or with others when their children are nearby. Care enough to train them, not merely treat them to a good life. Coach them, more than coddle."

Here's a start:

1. Talk over the issues you wish you would've known about adulthood.
2. Allow them to attempt things that stretch them and even let them fail.
3. Discuss future consequences if they fail to master certain disciplines.
4. Aid them in matching their strengths to real-world problems.
5. Furnish projects that require patience, so they learn to delay gratification.
6. Teach them that life is about choices and trade-offs; they can't do everything.
7. Initiate (or simulate) adult tasks like paying bills or making business deals.
8. Introduce them to potential mentors from your network.
9. Help them envision a fulfilling future, and then discuss the steps to get there.
10. Celebrate progress they make toward autonomy and responsibility.