

Opinion: Children should have to earn their rewards

By Ruben Navarrette Jr.

I often describe it as my most important job. It's the one that is the most difficult, and yet the most fulfilling. It consumes the most time, and it's the one where I most often feel as if I'm in over my head. It's also the one where the stakes are highest.

The job is being a parent to my three young children – ages 3, 5 and 7. And this New Year's, my resolution is to do it better.

There are no raises, promotions or awards for good parents. In fact, if you earn the title, most people won't even notice. The only evaluations that matter will come from your children, and the jury could be out for years.

But if you're a bad parent, the effects will be obvious and felt long after you're gone. As your children go through life, they'll be like a human billboard that announces your parenting "score" to the world.

There are countless ways to be a bad parent. Abandoning or failing to provide for your kids tops my list. Yet you can also get there by abusing, neglecting, smothering, bullying or belittling.

Yet what has me worried lately – both with my own kids, and with the rest of society – is that we're producing in the next generation a sense of entitlement. We're teaching kids that desiring something is the same as deserving it.

Along the way, we're diminishing the importance of what experts call "earned happiness" and replacing it with a system

that gives awards and rewards across the board based solely on needs and wants.

These days, it seems as if parents and teachers are more reluctant to reward good behavior in children, let alone punish bad behavior. In fact, in an era where building a child's self-esteem is the ultimate goal, we've become terrified of words like "good" and "bad."

The problem seems to be that we're confusing good or bad behavior with being a good or bad person. We must never tell our children that they are bad people – i.e., "You're a bad boy." But we can't be afraid to explain to our kids what it means to engage in bad behavior and make clear that we expect them to refrain from it. In trying to not be too hard on our kids, I fear we've gone too far in the opposite direction.

I knew this was happening in our society – that too many parents were surrendering their expectations, throwing in the towel and forgetting how to be parents. I recognized that the word "bad" had been shelved along with a host of other negative words that many parents today are reluctant to use – "no," "don't," "stop."

But I needed to hear it from a third party. When listening to a radio show, I recently heard a professor of psychiatry insist that even Santa Claus has been co-opted. He noted that it used to be natural for Santa to sit a child on his lap and ask: "Have you been a good girl?" This doesn't seem to happen much anymore, he said.

He's right. I crossed paths with several Santas during this holiday season, and I don't remember a single one making that inquiry. Instead, children – mine included – would walk up and Santa would ask only one question: "What do you want for Christmas?" What happened to the idea of a child earning his or her present through good behavior? You know, the difference between being naughty and nice.

That idea is gone. In our shopping-mall culture of materialism and consumerism, every child gets a present. Just like, in sports, everyone gets a ribbon. We can't leave anyone out, so we no longer expect anything from anyone. In fact, now the tables have turned, and it is the recipient who expects something for nothing.

This parenting business is tricky. You want to give your kids nice things, but you have to be careful not to give them too much. You don't want to tear them down, but you can't demand too little. Being a good parent is a balancing act. It's more art than science. A pinch of this, a dash of that. Most of us will never get it exactly right. Mistakes come with the territory.

Even so, this year, I've got to do a better job of it. And it starts not with settling for less but with expecting more – from my kids, and from myself.

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