



## ***Who's In Charge?: Three Steps to Transforming the Bossy Child***

by Todd Sarnier, MA, MFT. Director of Transformative Parenting

*When Rebecca came to see me she was at her wit's end and didn't know what to do. The scenario she described was all too familiar. She is a dedicated and loving mom and tries very hard to give her 5-year-old child all the love and attention he needs. As wonderful as her boy is, she says sometimes he can be a "little terror". He can be bossy and argumentative, often telling her what to do. This drives Rebecca crazy and she finds herself reacting in ways that make her feel bad about herself- taking things away from him and sometimes yelling back at him. Just the day before, after spending an hour making a dinner for the family that he normally likes, he refused to eat it and ordered her to make something else just for him. Frustrated and tired, she lost it and screamed that she would "throw away every toy in the house" if he didn't eat the dinner she made for him. He ate his dinner, but the whole night was hard and Rebecca felt racked with guilt.*

### **What makes a bossy child?**

A fundamental mistake parents and teachers make with children who are bossy is to assume that they are confident or strong-willed children. This is usually not the case. Developmental science, specifically attachment theory, tells us that the root of most behavior problems in children has to do with their ability to feel connected to and taken care of by the adult caretakers in their lives- usually their parents. This could not be truer of the bossy child.

The relationship between parent and child is not a relationship of equals. It is not a peer relationship or a friendship. Don't get me wrong, that doesn't mean that we do not try to be loving and respectful of our children, but we are not meant to primarily be their buddies. Our relationship with our children is hierarchal, a relationship between *one who is taking care of* (the parent) and *one who is being taken care of* (the child).

What I see over and over again in my individual consults with parents and in my courses, are frustrated parents like Rebecca. They are great moms and dads who love their kids. Yet they try so hard to make everything work for their child, to be their friend and to not let them be upset, that they are not making their day-to-day decisions based on what the child *needs*, but rather what the child *wants*.

Children need us to be strong and confident and to take care of them, even if to take care of them means to upset them in the short-term. If a child does not feel

like we are in charge, this makes them feel insecure and they move to be in charge themselves. It's like they are saying to us, "*if you're not going to be the boss, I'm going to!*" Of course, this is unconscious, and we make a big mistake if we take their behavior personally.

The other part of this equation is the sensitivity of your particular child. The more sensitive the child, the more likely they are to move to be in charge if they are feeling insecure.

### **What make the situation worse?**

When you understand that bossiness comes from insecurity and not from confidence or rudeness or a strong-will, you can begin to see the solution lies in addressing this underlying insecurity. Unfortunately, most advice parents get these days falls in one of two camps, both of which can be problematic.

The first is behaviorism. Behaviorism say that when your child is "acting up" or otherwise behaving badly that you are meant to react to this behavior by doing something that will stop the bad behavior immediately and to teach the child a lesson. If the child is already feeling insecure, it won't help this insecurity to make them feel wrong or bad or to punish them. The child gets the message that we don't see what's really going on for them and therefore we are not *taking care of* them. Behavioral approaches often work in the short term, but over time, they stop working and can make problems much much worse. Rebecca intuitively did not believe in the behavioral approach, but when push came to shove and she got really frustrated, she fell into this trap and started threatening to take away things that her son cares about.

The other camp is one for whom I have a lot of respect and compassion. It consists of moms and dads who are trying so hard to have a natural and loving relationship with their child that they don't always understand the hierarchal nature of the parent-child relationship that I mentioned before. They will sometimes call themselves child-centered or child-led or even attachment parents, and they are some of the most dedicated parents I've ever met. Often they are driven by a need to not parent in the way they were parented, which may have been emotionally neglectful or abusive. I think the intentions of this camp are wonderful and I absolutely believe in the principles of attachment theory, but one of the rules of attachment is that it is, again, not a relationship of equals. This was how Rebecca usually tried to parent- she went out of her way to follow her child's lead and to make him happy, but this leads to him sometimes not feeling taken care of.

### **Three Practices to Transform the Bossy Child**

Transforming the bossy child sometimes takes a little time, sometimes takes

longer, but can almost always be achieved. The important thing to realize is that doing this is not so much about *what to do* but more about *who you are* to your child. Are you passive with your child, always trying to make things work? Or do you have a deep confidence that you know what's right for your child and make decisions based on that knowing, no matter what the consequences? This isn't always easy, and none of us are perfect, but this is an essential part of the *art* and *practice* of parenting. There are 15 or 20 points I make with parents in consultations and courses about how to transform the bossy child and I want to highlight three of the most important ones here.

*1) Read the need and take the lead*

Parenting is not meant to be a reactive job. When we are reacting to our child's behavior or moods or requests all the time we are by definition letting them be in the lead. We are meant to do most of our work as parents proactively- understanding our child's particular sensitivities, anticipating their needs, and moving to take care of them. When possible, it's best to meet their needs before they ask. For instance, if a young child is starting to drag their feet and you know they're going to ask to be picked up, getting there first by warmly and enthusiastically saying, "Hey, I want to hold you!" can make a child's eyes light up and feel like, "Wow, I wanted to be picked up and I didn't even have to ask!" These children will more often feel satisfied and want to walk again on their own *before* the child that has to ask to be picked up. This sounds simple, but it is one of the most profound shifts many parents can make to help their child feel more secure.

*2) Don't use excessive threats or leverage*

One of the most common practices we use as parents these days is to take away or threaten to take away things that our children care about. This might be a toy or this might be an experience- play time, reading time, a birthday party, or some other fun outing. This is sending a couple of dangerous messages. The first is that we as parents will use their care for something against them. This can cause children over time to just not care about things because they feel it will just be taken away and that will hurt. But it's the second message that is most relevant to understanding how to deal with the bossy child. Using excessive threats and leverage communicates to a child that you are feeling powerless and not acting from a place of natural authority. This undercuts your power as a parent and contributes to their insecurity.

*3) Limit how much you negotiate or seek permission*

We are not meant to seek our child's permission before we go to the store. We are not meant to negotiate with them about what we're making for dinner. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that we shouldn't keep in mind our child's likes and preferences, but in general we are meant to be the ones calling the shots. Sometimes I illustrate this by talking about how some other cultures see the act of feeding those they love. In parts of France or Italy for instance, children

wouldn't even think of telling their parents what to make for dinner. It is more a part of these cultures to understand that feeding those you love is part of how you take care of them. You take your knowledge of what is healthy and nutritious and combine it with your knowing their preferences and you provide for them in a generous way without them needing to ask. Too often these days, we follow our child's lead by making them whatever they want, even if it causes us extra effort and strain. Think of how good it feels to you when someone anticipates your needs and then demonstrate this at home with your kids.

***“But don't parents have to teach a child that it's not OK to boss people around?”***

Of course we want to teach our children right and wrong, including issues like this. It is OK to communicate this message to our kids, but it is not very effective to try to teach them a lesson when we are having problems, including problems with bossiness. The more important goal here is to see the bossiness as a symptom of insecurity and to first address this underlying problem. When a child is feeling secure and we are in a position of natural authority, they are far more likely to listen to us and to learn the right way of behaving.

***“I want my child to be happy. Are you trying to say that we shouldn't ever give them what they want?”***

No, not at all. We all want to be loving and respectful to our children and to make them happy. The message here is that it is our number one priority to take care of them and not to be their best friend because these roles are often incompatible. If we are pushovers *or* if we are overly harsh, this can lead to insecurity. We need to find the balance of being compassionate and firm and always in charge of their needs.

### **How the transformation takes place:**

I worked with Rebecca over a few sessions on this topic and on some related issues. At first she told me what I was saying made sense to her but she also pushed me a lot for more “to-do's”. I provided these practices and some others and she worked week to week on trying them out and seeing how her child reacted. I encouraged her to pay attention to becoming more proactive rather than reactive in her parenting. In some cases, there were immediate results. In others it took a little bit longer, but that is natural. Rebecca shared with me that she was parented in a very strict way that didn't always give her the feeling of being loved. She was so determined to not be that way with her child that she went to the opposite extreme at times and then got resentful and angry when her child didn't seem to appreciate her efforts.

I heard ran into Rebecca a couple of months after our sessions and she was

smiling from ear to ear. She told me that she still had her hard days from time to time, but that overall things had changed significantly in their home. She had thought she was really aware of her child's needs, which she was for the most part, but she told me she had become much more attuned to some of the subtleties of his behavior, especially when he was feeling tired or upset.

### **Summary:**

Bossiness in children is very common these days and in my experience is becoming even more so. There are many factors that contribute to this, including the ones that I have explained here. The important thing to understand is that bossiness is challenging and frustrating but it is resolvable. As parents, we will always face challenges and frustrations. Rebecca still comes to see me from time to time to discuss some of hers. However, she is no longer feeling nearly the same level of frustration and guilt as when she first came to see me. She says she may get a bossy remark or two in a day, but that she is handling these situations with a great deal more confidence and that this seems to make all the difference in the world.

### **What to do now:**

Practice integrating these principles into your life for the next month. Remember, don't try for perfection, just try to head in the right direction. We're not perfect and we all have bad days. Consider working on this with a friend or two who are experiencing the same dynamic with their child.

Make sure you are on the same page with your spouse and other important caretakers in your child's life. Discuss these principles and talk about how you can better implement them in your home.

Consider keeping a journal of your feelings and experiences during this month (and beyond). This is one of the very best ways to process feelings and to discover new ideas and solutions.

*Todd Sarnier, MA, MFT is a licensed psychotherapist and Director of Transformative Parenting, a Parent Consulting & Education practice in Mill Valley, California. He does individualized consultations with parents in person and on the phone as well as conducting live and online parenting classes and courses. Todd was asked by leading developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld (**Hold On to Your Kids**) to be one of the first interns in his professional training program and he is currently a Faculty Member of the Neufeld Institute. You can reach Todd at (415)289-6515 or by emailing [todd@transformativeparenting.com](mailto:todd@transformativeparenting.com). His website is: [www.transformativeparenting.com](http://www.transformativeparenting.com)*