

## Have You Been Naughty Or Nice?

### The Myth That Children Need To Be Good

During this holiday season one often hears children being asked, “Have you been naughty or nice this year?” As an adult I would find it difficult to classify my own year’s behavior for 365 days, or even for one day, into a one word polarized category as either “good” or “bad”!

Both children and adults are imperfect. We each have various combinations of strengths and weaknesses as well as areas that need step-by-step improvement. Parents and children have days and times we are just off kilter due to many underlying factors such as inadequate sleep, nutrition and exercise as well as illness and tension. These are especially exaggerated during busier times like the winter holiday period.

Not just during this season, but throughout the year there are many times that children are reminded “To be good”, or their day or behavior is evaluated and labeled simply as either “good” or “bad”. Many times the subjective opinion of the adult is based on how his own day is going.

Being defined as “bad” can have a powerful and devastating effect on the child’s sense of self and can cause a self- fulfilling prophecy if repeated often. Many times the child may not know what he has done to deserve this label. In addition, the child may have an angry reaction which makes learning new behavior at that moment impossible.

Children, without an adult’s positive, supportive guidance may be clueless about how to reverse their so called “bad” behavior. Sometimes adults themselves don’t exactly know what they want the child to do differently or how to teach them to do it.

Surprisingly, being labeled, “good”, can also have some negative effects. Again, children often do not understand what they have done to deserve this label; they aren’t quite sure how to repeat it. It can also put pressure on a child to be perfect in the eyes of the adult who is doing the judging.

“Santa, Define Good “ says a package of holiday napkins I use year round in parenting workshops to illustrate why using labels (particularly good and bad) to describe children’s behavior can be counterproductive in helping children learn how to behave appropriately. Rather than using vague language such as “Stop being lazy”, “Be on your best behavior”, “Make me proud of you”, “Don’t be so selfish”, “Act right”, and “Be good”, Dr. Becky Bailey of [www.consciousdiscipline.com](http://www.consciousdiscipline.com) reminds us that it is more helpful to teach the behavior you want to see by “painting a picture for the child” including some action words of your expectations. She adds that young children think in pictures until about age eight and are highly suggestible to acting out the words they hear whether they are positive or negative ones.

Teaching children what we want them to do in **Brief, Objective, Positive and Specific** phrases (**BOPS**) increases the opportunity for encouraging positive, acceptable behavior in young children.

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Unfortunately, it is easier to blurt out a vague request than for the adult to figure out specific, clear and positive expectations. This skill takes practice to learn. These same techniques work equally well for stating your expectations, offering positive alternatives to misbehavior or reinforcing any positive behavior observed. The pay off in each of these example situations is that children usually respond fairly quickly with an increase in positive behavior.

- “At the holiday party, use your inside voice and walking feet inside. Let’s practice before we leave the house.” (Rather than, “Don’t behave badly at the party and embarrass me by being wild.”)
- “If you want a turn with the soccer ball, tell your friend, I would like to have a turn when you are through.” (Rather than, “Stop grabbing and being selfish”.)
- “You remembered all by yourself to put your book bag and coat on their hooks.” (Rather than ‘Good job!’)

In summary, the words we chose to set limits with children have a powerful effect on whether we bring out their best behavior or unknowingly encourage unacceptable behavior. In this season of gift giving, give yourself and your children the gift of describing your expectations and their behavior with specific, positive language and eliminate naughty, nice, good and bad from your limit setting vocabulary.

Sorry, Santa! It’s time to take a parenting course!

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