

Counselor's Corner

Rita Mitchell, MA, LPC

Angela Bender, MA, LPC

What is a Proactive Parent?

A proactive parent wants what's best for her children, but recognizes that sometimes they have to earn it, go without it, or lose it before they also value it. He allows his children to sometimes falter, fail, and fall; knowing that failure will teach them more about succeeding than his constant rescues ever could.

A proactive parent clearly spells out reasonable but high expectations, and holds firm (without giving in or back-tracking) until her children achieve them. Her children begin to learn that their own good choices generally lead to good consequences, and their bad choices often lead to unpleasant consequences, because she consistently allows them to experience this. Although they like to blame their proactive parent for the consequences that they dislike, they eventually learn that they can receive more frequent rewards by making more good choices--and they try to take responsibility for their bad choices.

A proactive parent is gentle but firm, flexible yet consistent, empathetic but unwavering. He recognizes and respects where his rights and responsibilities end and where his children's begin...and through his expectations and responses, teaches his children to do the same. A proactive parent is willing to forgo present thanks and pleasure for future rewards. She recognizes that today's trials lead to tomorrow's triumphs, both for herself and her children.

A proactive parent knows that his children's verbal, emotional, and physical resistance to his "no" will eventually go away when they're ready to move on to the next request. And then he will feel stronger for holding firm, and his children, like steel refined by fire, or a tree strengthened by the wind, will also be stronger.

Proactive parents know that neither they nor their children are perfect, and while their standards are high, through unconditional love and acceptance, they create a physically and emotionally safe environment in which their children can experience both failure and success. They may sometimes doubt their effectiveness as parents, feel guilty for being "tough" on their children, dislike the children's sometimes hurtful responses, feel isolated and alone, and grow weary from adhering to high standards. Yet they believe that "tough love," although it isn't always "warm and fuzzy love," builds character and enables people to interact more effectively with others.

Are you a "proactive parent?" Do you wish you could be? One cannot be a proactive parent alone! You need support from family members who provide love, encouragement, and instruction. You need to work with your children's teachers to ensure that there are similar expectations both at home and at school, as we teach responsibility and hold our children accountable. This type of teamwork is what is intended by the common saying, "It takes a village!" Kids provide daily opportunities for us to learn to be proactive parents, including throwing a tantrum if they don't get what they want, refusing to do their chores, asking for more money (after wasting their own), making hurtful comments, and stressing our resolve through whining, asking incessantly, sulking, or making threats. Children around the world provide these fabulous learning opportunities for the people tasked with caring for and instructing them. What can we do to equip them with the necessary skills for being effective participants in their relationships, whether it's with us, or with others?

~ Laurel Falvo, Certified Family Life Educator & Executive Director, The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding