

Should our children submit or subvert?

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We want to raise [social justice warriors](#)—kids who champion equality and care for the vulnerable, and who subvert the power systems in our world by embodying the prophetic ways of Jesus. We want to activate their imagination, and to hope they'll do better than we did. Whether we admit it or not, we want our children to reflect the values close to our hearts. I know it's tricky business imposing our own dreams on little autonomous human beings, but if I'm honest, I want my deepest convictions to become theirs. I want to partner with them in paving the ways of peace and righteousness.

We need our children to have an inclination towards subverting authority. In order to create change, they would be required to push back against the status quo with critical thinking and a skeptical eye. **We must develop in them the ability to challenge, to advocate, and to provoke.**

Um ... wait. I think I just described a two-year-old.

Herein lies our dilemma. As much as we want to breathe fire into their souls, we also must nurture a foundation of respectability. We need to parent beyond toddler-level maturity, so we place boundaries on their behavior, defining and teaching what is acceptable. We ask them to submit to cultural and social conventions (don't pick your nose in public, don't eat spaghetti with your hands, etc.), painstakingly teach them self-control and the discipline of delayed gratification.

This process is messy. For those of us who grew up in authoritarian households, when we are rattled by mischievous toddler behavior, our reflex is to demand submission and respect for authority, perhaps a bit more harshly than we would otherwise like.

**At what point are we crushing their spirits, stripping the very rebellious spirit we need from them to grow into adults who push the limits of traditional boundaries and move us forward as a society?** How do we teach them to learn the rules, abide by the rules, and then launch them into the world to

break the rules?

I think sometimes people mistake progressive parenting for permissive parenting. Perhaps as an overreaction to overly strict control, some parents allow their children free rein in order to ensure their autonomy isn't breached. And as much as I also want to respect the power dynamic between adults and children, even erring on the side of empowerment of children's choices, **I think it is a lot harder to learn self-discipline and submission when those habits haven't been instilled at a young age.**

Everything I have learned about social justice, reconciliation, and liberation work is how much it requires laborious grind. We can't avoid having to work within the imperfect systems of this world. For now, at least, we don't live in utopia and we do need to jump through hoops. Which means that as much as we want to raise our children to be dynamic world changers, we also have to teach them how to jump hoops like a circus monkey.

I think we have to keep both goals in mind in our parenting. Do we let our four-year-old color outside of the lines? Or do we say, Honey, I love your enthusiasm and energy and these beautiful colors but let's practice to see if we can draw within the lines? Should we let our teen choose a debate out of passion and conviction or encourage him to first learn to defend the status quo?

**Perhaps these are false binaries, that our children can be both submissive AND subversive, or at least learn to discern what is appropriate.** But I think when it comes down to the concrete realities of parenting choices, we are having to choose between demanding one or the other. Like I said, it's exhausting.

However, I believe it is the unique calling for those of us who grew up conservative evangelical but are breathing the fresh air of a Christianity that matters in the right-now world, to hold in tension both solid discipline and creative expression in our parenting of the next generation. We know how to teach the rules because we held them religiously growing up. But God knows we have also come to bristle at them.

Let's show our kids how to do this, to develop grit and perseverance, to submit to one another, to roll with circumstances that cannot be changed—but also, to channel their fiercest toddler tantrum in the adult world and protest against forces that oppress the marginalized. **May they become bearers of good news that is true for the most vulnerable.** May they draw for themselves the most vibrant of

pictures out of their own imagination because we took the care to teach them how to draw inside of the lines and venture beyond.

*Originally posted at [Brandt's blog](#)*