

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

Allowing Our Children To Be Children

from the American Counseling Association

It seems obvious that, "Children are not little adults." But we often forget that simple truism in interacting with our children, resulting in unnecessary frustration for both us and them.

The world appears very differently to children than it does to adults. Children do, in fact, exist in their "own little worlds." They usually can't react to life the way adults do simply because they haven't yet had the life experiences we've had. The following examples of adult expectations illustrate how far apart we and our children often are in how we view the world:

"Don't be so messy!" A messy house might embarrass Mom, but not her kids. An adult with muddy slacks might constantly apologize for his appearance; your son with muddy jeans only wants to tell you how it happened stealing second base.

"Realize how busy I am and what pressure I'm under!" Young people aren't yet experiencing stress and time pressure. What they hear you saying is that they're only allowed to have feelings or need help when it's convenient for you, when the outside world isn't more important.

"Be aware of how dangerous the world is!" While we want our kids to be safe, instilling unreal fears or passing on our own anxieties doesn't make that happen. We may be unintentionally making the world feel unsafe and scary.

"There's so much to do and so little time!" Young people don't fill their days with 101 things to do. They usually don't have the urgent commitments adults face. They gauge time by whether it's light or dark, or when they have slept and woken up. Children like wearing watches because the watch is "cool," not because they care what time it is.

There's a real benefit in remembering that children are really just children, not smaller adults, and in letting them enjoy that childhood. We shouldn't expect them to live up to our dreams, understand our problems, or want to spend "quality time" with adults rather than hanging out with friends.

As adults, we sometimes have to impose rules and actions that our children simply don't understand or relate to (like cleaning up that room before it's a health issue). But realizing why they don't understand, even though they may be doing what is asked, can avoid needless fights and frustration for both parent and child.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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