

Put the Badge Down

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“I’ve taken away her phone, her laptop, given her extra chores....I don’t know what else to do!”

My client was frustrated about her 14 year old daughter’s behavior, and felt entirely out of options. They had struggles over getting to school on time, getting chores done, even trying to decide what to have for lunch.

All parents find themselves in power struggles with their children at one time or another. We want what’s best for our children, and we don’t want them to make the same mistakes we did, but sometimes they just won’t listen! Even worse, sometimes they won’t even do their own small part to help things run well for everyone.

As the adults, we have almost all of the power – we have all the money, the transportation, we make and enforce the rules, etc. We know it, and our kids know it. And sometimes we are quick to assume control of a situation that doesn’t actually need our taking control.

My client explained a typically difficult morning. Her daughter set an alarm but would not get out of bed, and so my client would go in and wake her up again later. Her daughter then washed up and got dressed before coming downstairs for breakfast (which my client made). They were supposed to leave the house no later than 7:35am, so that my client could get to work on time. This meant that the children had to get to school a little early, but none of them wanted to ride the bus. But they were often a few minutes late due to the daughter not getting her act together. The constant aggravation turned my client into the family policewoman, both directing morning household traffic and making threats about punishments for her daughter’s tardiness.

I encouraged my client to get out of the policing business. Instead of reminding, cajoling, and nagging her daughter to get ready and out the door, I suggested that she make her expectations clear, and then let her daughter be in charge of her own morning routine. The main thing my client needed was to get to work on time, not for her daughter to do her morning routine in a particular way beforehand. Instead of laying out punishments, I suggested that the situation had its own built-in consequences. If her daughter wasn’t in the car when my client left for work at 7:35 (I emphasized that my client needed to leave on time regardless), she wouldn’t have a ride to school. That was the daughter’s problem. She would get an unexcused absence at school, and probably have work to make up. And, if this happened regularly, my client could just sign her daughter up for the bus. Instead of my client having to face consequences for her daughter’s tardiness, her daughter would have to deal with them. This puts the responsibility and the consequences where they belong. And helps her daughter learn the connection between her actions and her consequences, essential for being an adult.