

Don't Give Me That Attitude!

24 *Rude, SELFISH, INSENSITIVE*
Things Kids Do and How to Stop Them

Michele Borba, Ed.D.



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“This smart and helpful book integrates much of what we know about raising moral children. I especially like the book’s constructive way of pulling together a wide range of theoretical approaches and coming up with a wealth of sensible child-rearing tips.”

—William Damon, professor and director,
Stanford University Center on Adolescence

“This how-to guide to teaching children moral intelligence fills a deep need. It is practical, filled with excellent activities, and based on solid research.”

—Kevin Ryan, director emeritus, Boston University Center
for the Advancement of Ethics and Character

“This is perhaps the best written guide for parents and educators concerned with the deep character and moral intelligence of their children or students. It is wise, literate, and valuable.”

—Peter Scharf, director, Center for Society,
Law and Justice at the University of New Orleans,
and author, *Growing Up Moral*

“Michele Borba articulates the core traits that build and promote responsible citizenship among the young and old alike. Creating safe schools begins with responsible behavior. Dr. Borba explains in clear, concise, and effective ways how to make that happen. Her book is a ‘must read’ for parents, educators, and community leaders.”

—Ronald D. Stephens, executive director,
National School Safety Center

Parents Do Make a Difference

“Michele Borba’s new book is invaluable. Drawing on a lifetime of rich experience, the author understands parents’ concerns and speaks to them wisely and compassionately. Best of all, she spells out what parents need to know in easily accessible language and easily learnable stages.”

—Nathaniel Branden, author,
The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem and *A Woman’s Self-Esteem*

“Packed with helpful suggestions and insights. This book is a wonderful guide to help kids become winners.”

—Louise Hart, author, *The Winning Family:
Increasing Self-Esteem in Your Children and Yourself*
and *On the Wings of Self-Esteem*

“Dr. Michele Borba’s years of research and experience make her uniquely qualified as an expert in the field. The many practical and creative suggestions offered here are sound, effective ways of developing successful human beings. I’m certain that this outstanding book will become an extremely valuable guide and resource for both parents and teachers.”

—Robert W. Reasoner, president, International Council for Self-Esteem, and retired school superintendent

“*Parents Do Make a Difference* is able to address the core issues of parenting. Cross-culturally, Dr. Michele Borba has brought valuable insights to teaching professionals. Her parenting ideas have also been widely adopted by parent educators in Hong Kong.”

—Ivan Yiu, assistant community services secretary
for children and youth,
Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, Hong Kong

“Every child arrives in life with a birthright to healthy self-esteem and to be welcomed, nurtured, and inspired by parents who abide by the practices Michele Borba recommends in this book. Applying these principles would quickly help the world become a much healthier and happier place.”

—Senator John Vasconcellos, 13th District,
California State Senate

“Finally, a ‘cookbook’ for parents and educators on how to raise successful kids. My seminar attendees have asked me for years, ‘Wouldn’t it be terrific if children could be exposed to these principles of self-esteem?’ Michele, you’ve done it. The world needs your recipes for success—what a difference they’ll make in our kids’ futures!”

—Bob Moawad, chairman and CEO,
Edge Learning Institute, and past president,
National Association for Self-Esteem

“Michele Borba has done it again—she’s written another must-have, must-read book! Parents of children will ask, ‘Why didn’t they have this when my kids were younger?’ and then buy it for their grown kids so the grandkids will be raised sensibly. I highly recommend this book to anyone who cares about kids.”

—Hanoch McCarty, coeditor,
A 4th Course of Chicken Soup for the Soul,
and coauthor, *Acts of Kindness*

“This book is loaded with practical, proven ideas for teachers and parents to use in their efforts to be the best influence they can be. Children of all ages will be helped to develop skills they need to be their personal best in the new millennium.”

—Dorothy Rouse, board member and former teacher,
Los Gatos Union School District, Los Gatos, California

“By applying the strategies from *Parents Do Make a Difference* I experienced such stunning success with a severely disturbed foster child that it caused an astonished juvenile court judge to label her transformation ‘miraculous.’ He even led his courtroom to a round of applause for her success and credited her rehabilitation to Dr. Borba’s techniques. One could only imagine how using these techniques could profoundly impact the lives of all children.”

—Dawn Hamill, foster child advocate

“I strongly endorse Michele Borba’s new book, *Parents Do Make a Difference*. Grounded in solid research, her message has the potential to truly help parents help their children be more successful in school and in life.”

—Richard Herzberg, executive director,
Bureau of Education and Research

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Note to the Reader: All of the letters in this book have been received from parents over the past few years. The names of the parents and children, as well as their location, have been changed to protect their privacy.

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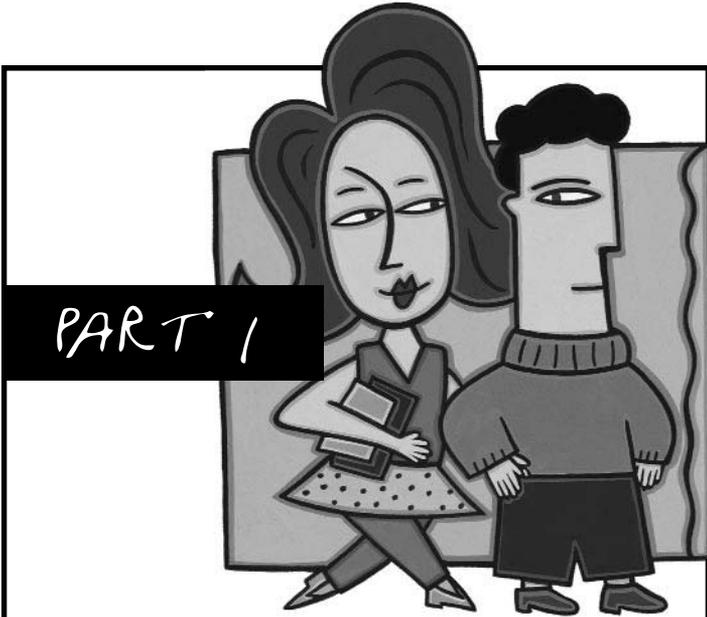
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To Alan Rinzler,
A more skilled, supportive, and knowledgeable editor
I could not imagine.
From a most appreciative author.



Confronting the Crisis

*Sow a thought and you reap an act;
Sow an act and you reap a habit;
Sow a habit and you reap a character;
Sow a character and you reap a
destiny.*

—Charles Reade

Dear Dr. Borba,

As much as I hate to admit it, our twelve-year-old son is becoming a spoiled brat. Frankly, there are times I'm just at my wit's end! I love him to death, but I really don't like what he's turning into: self-centered, inconsiderate, and downright rude! He only thinks of himself and can be quite flippant and fresh. I tell him to stop, I ground him and remove privileges, but his selfish, rude ways are still there. How do I get him to stop giving me this attitude? There has to be a better way!

—Jenny K., a mom from Portland, Oregon

Bad Attitude Act Out

"What do I get if I do it?"

"I want it, and I want it now!"

"Why should I care how she feels?"

"Get real. I'm doing it my way!"

Sound familiar? These outbursts from selfish, rude, fresh, demanding kids are symptoms of a swiftly growing epidemic that is sweeping the country. Now this doesn't mean there aren't any good kids left in the world; of course, there are! In fact, studies suggest that this generation is volunteering more than ever before. But let's stay focused on the crisis at hand. It's there, it's growing, and it won't go away until we decide it's a big enough problem to do something about. Experts differ as to the most appropriate way to label this breed of self-centered, insensitive youth, describing their behavior with such psychological terminology as "overindulged," "grandiose," "narcissistic," and even "egocentric-regressed." Most lay folks agree that the plain, old-fashioned term "spoiled brat" fits just fine. And it's also a term that every parent dreads. "Not my kid! A big brat? Never!" It's embarrassing, it's humiliating, it's the crisis we all dreaded might occur with our own sons and daughters.

Even the word “spoiled” sounds as if it’s rotten: there’s nothing you can do about it, and you have to throw it away.

But we’re not talking about apples and oranges here: these are our precious children, our loved ones, our hope for the future. We can’t give up and abandon our most treasured human blessings, the relationships we most cherish. We can’t ever stop believing that we *can* make a difference in confronting this crisis, that everything we do now will play a crucial role in turning their lives around and shaping their ultimate destiny. We must have faith that there is a way to help our kids defeat the negative consequences and long-term penalties of the Big Brat Factor.

EXPOSING THE BIG BRAT FACTOR

How are things on your own home front these days? Do you ever wonder if your darling cherub could be the next poster child for “most spoiled”? Have you thought (secretly, of course) how much easier selling your kids on eBay would be than raising them for one more minute? Do you sometimes feel as though you’ve become your kids’ ATM machine? If so, chances are your kid has a big dose of the Big Brat Factor.

Take a deep breath, and know you’re not alone: millions of other parents are in the same boat. There is an epidemic in our society, and not only that, it’s not just in the good old U.S.A. During the past eighteen months, I’ve worked with parents and educators in Canada, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Finland, and elsewhere, and I can tell you that children worldwide are now victims of this malady. The good news is that this is not a natural disaster but a human dilemma, and that means we can do something about it. The first step is realizing that brats don’t come in just one shape or form. In fact, there’s a broad variety of brat types that could be living under your very own roof. Check out the following list to see if it inspires the shock of recognition:

The Little Princess—Mr. Fresh Prince Syndrome. Do your kids feel they are entitled to get everything they want and rule the roost? Do you feel you are running a bed-and-breakfast establishment instead of a home? Are you picking up after your kids and doing their chores because you can't bear dealing with their reaction if you ask them to do it themselves? (And heaven forbid if you asked your precious offspring to do something for you!)

The Con Artist. Does your kid manipulate you morning, noon, and night? Does she excuse, blame, fib, threaten, guilt-trip, and play you off against your partner? Is this the same kid you just said no to and somehow she's charmed you to give in? She's good, isn't she?

The Donald Trump Clone. Do you have a "gimme, gimme, gimme" kid? Is he so greedy and materialistic that to him you're nothing but a walking wallet? Is his vocabulary riddled with brand names? Does his closet overflow with stuff he's never worn or used? Are you looking at the want ads for job number four so you can pay for this kid's lifestyle? And how will he ever balance his budget when he's finally living on his own?

The Drama Queen. Does your little munchkin act as if she just lost the Oscar when she doesn't get her way? Is she such a diva that you can't change the TV channel without asking her permission? Do her theatrics leave you drained and exhausted at the end of the day? Why can't this kid take no for an answer?

"Poor Little Me." Does your child feel so sorry for himself that you find yourself always doing everything for him and expecting very little in return? Does he constantly complain about too much homework, friends who are mean to him, or how unfair you treat him? Do you find yourself rescuing him because it's so much easier than listening to his woes and moans?

Cruella De Vil. Is your kid so mean and nasty that you cringe at some of the things she says or does? Is she so insensitive that she can't see how her words and deeds hurt others? Are you afraid to confront her style of put-downs, sarcasm, and cutting remarks because you can't bear to receive yet another one of her stinging insults? How will she ever form loving relationships?

The Emperor Napoleon. Do you have an arrogant kid who acts as if he's out to conquer the world? Is he a smart aleck, know-it-all, little snob? Does he have a superiority complex? Does he treat you as if you are one of his subjects in his master plan to seize the throne? How can *you* be the parent if this kid is the boss?

Miss Bad Manners. Are you afraid to take your kid out in public because she's so fresh and rude? Does she stick out her tongue, interrupt, burp, and talk on her cell in the middle of the movie? Are raised eyebrows becoming all too common from strangers as well as friends when they see how your kid acts?

Couch Potato. Is your kid lazy, irresponsible, and uncooperative? Is he stuck in the family room with the remote control wired to his fingers? Is his chore chart fading away on your refrigerator door? How can you motivate him to wake up and join the human race?

In Your Face. How can you live with a kid who is defiant, rebellious, noncompliant, and never does what you ask? Are you doing stress-reduction exercises on your doorstep to find the courage to deal with what waits within?

Mr. Bigot. Is your kid narrow-minded, intolerant, and biased toward certain ideas, individuals, and groups of people? Does he tell racist jokes or believe in prejudicial stereotypes, and can't tolerate any ideas except his own? Do you feel you can't

break through the stone wall of his mind to show him the wonderful reality of human diversity?

The Terminator. Does your kid behave with ruthless aggression in trying to overcome anything and everything that stands in his way? Does he go ballistic when you say no to him, when his friends won't do what he says, when his coaches put him on the bench? Do you worry when the phone rings that his explosive temper may have gotten him into big trouble?

Of course, no kid will fit exactly into any of these general categories; after all, the Big Brat Factor encompasses a wide spectrum of behaviors and attitudes and ranges from minor to major infractions. But seriously ask yourself if there's anything in these brat types that strikes a nerve or sounds even vaguely familiar. Nobody knows your child better than you do, so check your own instincts and ask yourself whether parenting is bringing you more stress than joy, more pain than happiness, more pangs than rewards. Do you fear that you're becoming the kind of parent you swore you'd never be? More nag than nurturer? More yellor than listener? More scolder than cheerleader? Most important, are you really worried that your kid is on the wrong track and needs an immediate makeover for her rude, insensitive ways? Then go with your instinct: it's time!

I have no doubt that you love your kid deeply. Your dream was to be the perfect parent and give your child your absolute best. You imagined that with such a passionate effort and with so much sacrifice and good intentions on your part, there's no way that your kid would turn out anything but wonderful.

So what went wrong? What's the underlying reason for the emergence of this spoiled kid of yours? How could he possibly have become a casualty of this epidemic? After many years of researching child development, being a special education teacher, working with over 750,000 parents and teachers

all over the world, and having three kids of my own, I've come to the conclusion that the basic cause for the kind of behaviors that create a spoiled, selfish, insensitive kid who's a victim of the Big Brat Factor is ATTITUDE. The one thing that all these kids share—whether they're arrogant, bad-mannered, impatient, greedy, narrow-minded, lazy, irresponsible, manipulative, uncooperative is a BAD ATTITUDE.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOR?

I wrote a book in 2002 called *No More Misbehavin': 38 Difficult Behaviors and How to Stop Them*. In this book, I tried to help parents target and eliminate common problems like whining, biting, fighting, poor sportsmanship, bullying, tattling, teasing, and other annoying things that kids do. The focus was on changing children's conduct and replacing their inappropriate habits with a more acceptable way of acting at home, at school, and in the community. My goal was to provide parents with tools and strategies for disciplining their children, for getting them back on the right path, and for creating an atmosphere that would allow family, friends, and teachers to interact with them in a more favorable manner.

And that's what behavior is: the kind of actions our kids do that we see, hear, feel in our gut, and instantly know whether it's a right or wrong way to be in the world. I'm talking about the meltdown in the mall, the beating up on little sister, the lying about homework, the talking back, meanness, tattling. All of these and many, many more are behavioral symptoms that parents must change. I'm sure you've had your share of these bad behaviors, and you know just what I'm talking about.

So what's the difference between changing your child's bad behavior and the subject of this book, which is changing your kid's attitude? What exactly is an attitude?

Behaviors are on the surface; attitudes run deep. Behaviors are actions; attitudes are a way of looking at life. Behaviors you can see; attitudes are often hidden and hard to figure. Behaviors are more reactive and impulsive; attitudes are longer term. Behaviors are a child's way of coping with the world; attitudes are the foundation of her character. Behaviors are here and now; attitudes will determine her destiny.

The spoiled kid crisis we're facing as parents today goes beyond just bad behavior to the underlying root cause of bad attitudes—for example:

- ***Bad attitudes are a bad way of looking at life.*** Kids who see the world as a cold and cruel place are often selfish and insensitive. And because they do believe it's acceptable, they treat others with meanness, rudeness, and intolerance.
- ***Bad attitudes are usually made up of bad behavior habits.*** Kids with bad-tempered attitudes usually start out by displaying their anger in unhealthy ways, such as biting, hitting, tantrums, or fighting. If not corrected, those bad behaviors turn into bad habits, and soon the child develops one big bad attitude that says to the world, "I'll use my anger to get what I want."
- ***Bad attitudes are often hidden and hard to figure.*** Kids who are insecure, fearful, and anxious may conceal or compensate for their feelings with attitudes of pessimism, jealousy, and cynicism.
- ***Bad attitudes run deep and can last a lifetime.*** Kids who have moms or dads who always pick up the pieces may face a lifetime addiction, dependency, and manipulation.
- ***Bad attitudes are the foundation for bad character.*** Kids who have learned how to get away with being irresponsible and uncooperative often end up as adults with a skewed moral compass.
- ***Bad attitudes can lead to a lifetime of unhappiness and social isolation.*** Kids who are spoiled, self-centered, arrogant, and disrespectful may never form lasting attachments or find personal fulfillment.

WE'VE GOT A BIG PROBLEM

Many parents assume that attitude isn't something that develops until the preadolescent or teen years. But times have changed, and any parent paying attention now realizes that even a four year old can have all the full-blown symptoms of a bad attitude. And boy can they make us miserable: their sass, back talk, and greedy, manipulative, bossy, and even defiant ways let us know in no uncertain terms that these little critters are on the road to poor character and a lack of moral intelligence—not to mention the damage their attitude can do to your family harmony. So don't think for a minute that bad attitude starts only when kids start watching MTV, talking on cell phones, sending instant e-mail messages, and playing video games.

Of course, they don't start out that way: the onset of a bad attitude has usually begun with smaller but definitely annoying actions—a whiny tone, a fresh comment, or a quiet rebuttal of an adult's request. Parents usually assumed their kids' conduct was “just a phase” or a single slip, and let it slide. And there lies our mistake. If not nipped early, this ailment spreads easily. Do beware: bad attitudes are highly contagious. If there are other siblings in the house, chances are they will catch it too.

One thing is clear: there does seem to be an epidemic of overindulged, demanding, rude kids with attitudes, and everyone seems to agree. Lawmakers, doctors, clergy, businesspeople, educators, parents, and the general public alike have voiced their concerns about the growing breed of overindulged youth. Just review some of the troubling facts in the Bad Attitude News Alerts scattered throughout this book.

Kids with bad attitude come in all sizes, both genders, all ages, and all cultures. They can be rich or poor; reside in rural, urban, or suburban areas; attend private or public school; have multiple siblings or be only children; live with a single parent or with both. The diversity of their lives seems to have little bearing on whether they acquire the dreaded ailment,

BAD ATTITUDE NEWS ALERT



- A national survey reveals that more than two-thirds of school police officers say younger children are acting more aggressively.
- Three-quarters of Minnesota kids surveyed by Mind-Works agreed that today's kids are materially spoiled and generally irresponsible.
- A poll of twelve to seventeen year olds conducted by the Center for a New American Dream, a nonprofit organization that promotes responsible consumption, showed that the average kid nags nine times to get a product his parents refuse to purchase; about half the parents finally give in.
- Nearly two out of three parents surveyed by a TIME/CNN poll said their kids measure self-worth more by possessions than their parents did at the same age.
- Eighty-five percent of respondents in a recent AOL Time Warner poll said kids in America are spoiled.
- Nine out of ten Americans felt the breakdown of common courtesy has become a serious problem in this country, a major contributor to the increase in violence, and an important factor in the breakdown of our values in this country.
- Only 12 percent of the two thousand adults polled felt that kids commonly treat others with respect; most described them as "rude," "irresponsible," and "lacking in discipline."
- Eighty percent of people think kids today are more spoiled than kids of ten or fifteen years ago. What's

more, two-thirds of parents admit that their own kids are spoiled.

- And it isn't getting any better.

although there is one factor that clearly is the greatest predictor for getting this disease: *kids were allowed to develop the bad attitude without opposition, and because there was no resistance or reaction, these bad attitudes flourished and grew.*

WHERE IS THIS COMING FROM?

Of course, there are other known causes that do contribute to the demise of kids' sensitivity, respect, and appreciation. A few more common reasons bad attitudes are flourishing in today's youth include these classic parenting blunders.

Keeping Up with the Joneses. We want our kids to have the same advantages as the kids next door: schooling, social events, the "in" fashions, gadgets, and technological paraphernalia. So we keep our radar extended to watch what the neighbors are doing, and probably far more often than we'd care to admit, we copy their moves. We may not mean to, but we do compete with those who have similar-aged kids. And—like it or not, we indulge our kids with what we think they must have to "keep up" or "stay ahead."

Experiencing Guilt. Economic hardships or just the desire to have a good life cause many parents to work long, hard hours. And that means more time away from the kids. The result is a good dose of parental guilt. The remedy: giving kids presents, having few rules or requirements, and slacking off on the

boundaries between kids and executive authority to make up for the parents' lack of presence. Does it work? No. But it sure is effective in creating overindulged kids.

Feeling Stressed and Exhausted. It's a fast-paced world these days, and many parents freely admit they barely have energy to phone for take-out food. So who has time to deal with a kid's bad attitude? It's far easier to let it slide. And so, more often than not, the bad attitude becomes a habit.

Misunderstanding Self-Esteem. One of the biggest parenting blunders is thinking that saying no to will diminish kids' self-esteem and spirit. Nothing could be further from the truth, so let me set the record straight: authentic self-esteem is about feeling worthy about who you are and competent to cope with life. What kid is going to feel worthy and competent with a bad attitude? His reputation suffers, adults give him those "looks," friends pull away, and he loses invitations. Actually, every arena of his life plummets: social, academic, moral, and emotional. Besides, every solid study on self-esteem finds that kids who are raised in less permissive homes tend to have higher self-esteem. These parents say no, set rules, establish clear behavior expectations, and consistently enforce those standards with fair discipline policies. Enough about self-esteem!

Delaying Childbirth. Many couples are postponing parenthood beyond the traditional childbearing years. Others have had trouble conceiving or adopting a child. So when they finally are blessed with their young ones, they may tend to overindulge, spoil, and have unrealistic expectations of their little miracles.

Succumbing to a Culture of Fear. Yes, we are living in a dangerous and uncertain world, but we can't allow the media focus on kidnappings, terrorism, school shootings, snipers, and

other disasters all over the world to influence our need to make us feel that we can keep kids safe and secure. Too many parents are overprotecting their children and spoiling them with material possessions and instant emotional indulgence in hopes of compensating for the bombardment of mean and scary images that surround them.

Misusing Quality Time. A rash of parenting books and child experts rushed to tell parents they must spend a set period of perfect moments with their child each day. So if Johnny shows a bad attitude or starts to act up during this special, blissful set-aside period of family bonding, the last thing a parent wants is to spoil those precious moments with any kind of confrontation.

Keeping 'Em Stimulated. In a well-intentioned effort to make their kids creative geniuses, many parents pile too many mind benders, growth gadgets, and other forms of intellectual stimulation on their little tykes. Sometimes what a kid needs most is alone time in the dirt. If you continue this overbearing, structured, and calculating intervention, your kid will grow passive and dependent, expect to be entertained, and be easily bored.

Buying into a Materialistic, Consumer-Driven World. Admit it: we're all susceptible to being seduced by advertising, and so are our innocent kids. Need proof? Since the 1970s, the average number of commercials a kid sees in a year has doubled from 20,000 to 40,000. And not only are kids spending more—a whopping \$36 billion annually—but they're becoming more consumer driven. A study by Penn State concluded that today's kids are not only more materialistic, but are also launching their big-time shopping careers at much younger ages. And one of the biggest reasons: we're giving in to their whims.

Desiring Something Better for Your Kids. Over the years I've talked to hundreds of parents, and by far the noblest reason given for indulging kids is wanting them to have a better childhood or future than theirs. When they describe the economic hardships or dysfunctional family life some of them have endured, I sympathize. But it's still not a reason to indulge. They mean well, but they're misdirected. They place their value on material goods instead of the values of virtue, selflessness, character, and sacrifice. The difference is huge, and it sends a terribly wrong message to kids.

Wanting to Be Our Kids' Best Friend. Somewhere along the way, the role of "parent" has been turned into "friend." And the parent's "relationship" with their child takes precedence over being authority, behavior manager, and guide. Reprimanding bad attitudes is not part of this agenda. The risk to the parent's popularity with their kid—and his friends—is far too great.

Now don't get me wrong: more often than not, our parenting intentions are honorable. After all, we don't want our kids to be brats; we want the best for them. We want them to be happy, successful, and fulfilled. We hate to reprimand them. We hate to say no. We want our kids to be popular and have just as much as the next kid. So we give them everything we think they need—or want—along with their bad attitudes. We enroll them in lots of activities and drive them to every known event and gathering. But sometimes our good intentions—and usually quite unintentionally—can become terribly skewed.

Here's the problem. We may be overlooking what really matters most in our kids' lives: that they turn into good and decent human beings. After all, years from now, the soccer game goal, SAT score, and those violin lessons will count little compared to the kind of adult your child has become. And one of the biggest things that will hinder your kid's character and reputation as a human being are those selfish, self-centered, rude, defiant makings of bad attitudes.