

# BEING FIRM AND UNIMPRESSED WITH DRAMA



## Key Principles

- Managing yourself
- Understanding the child's goal
- Moving from dependence to independence

**MEET...** Karen and Marina for the second time. In this episode, Karen has realized that she has been so concerned with fairness that she gives in to Marina more than she thinks she should and avoids setting limits. Karen's thinking is also influenced when she sees Marina agreeing on tape with Dr. Morse that she knows how to get what she wants from her mother.



## Managing yourself .....

Parents are often surprised to see how deliberate children's efforts can be to test limits and get attention. In Episode 1, we watched as Samantha repeatedly tested Kathy's limit about keeping water in the kitchen. In *Episode 2*, we watched as Tiwana sprayed her father's food with cleaning solution just one more time after being told to stop. When children test limits in this way, they are really testing the parent. The child who pushes the limit or is uncooperative is really saying, "See. I'm not going to do what you asked. What are *you* going to do about it?" How you manage yourself at these times has a profound affect on your present and future relationship with your child. If the limits you have set are reasonable and you have done a good job of communicating them, each time you allow your child to push the limit without consequence, you are training your child to push the limits more. In addition, you are telling your child you are not worthy of her respect. When you make agreements with your child and keep them, you are showing your respect. When you allow your child to break agreements with you, you are accepting (and rewarding!) disrespect. Managing yourself well is the most effective way to teach your child how to manage himself.

## Understanding the child's goal .....

Understanding the goal of a child's misbehavior provides a key to managing yourself well. Remember that a child's behavioral goal is motivated by a desire to feel important in the family group. But knowing that, how can you tell what the child's goal is and how to respond once you know what it is? Often, your own response to your child gives you the clues you need to understand the goal. Do you feel annoyed or irritated? Then your child is probably seeking attention. Do you feel angry and have the urge

to argue? Then your child is probably drawing you into a power struggle. Ironically, the best way to manage yourself well and help the child redirect a mistaken goal, is to do what doesn't come naturally. Is your child annoying you? Are you tempted to get her to stop by giving lots of negative attention, such as reminding or criticizing? Well don't. Ignore the child for the moment. Then, when she's playing or working well, tell her how much you appreciate it. Also, to encourage her own internal controls, comment that it looks like she's having a good time. Remember in *Episode 9* how gracefully Esther sidestepped Miranda and Jonathon's attempt to pull her into a power struggle when she said it was time to make dinner? She did what didn't come naturally. Rather than argue, she sidestepped their efforts. The speed with which they dropped their attempt to draw her in shows how effective this approach can be.

## Moving from dependence to independence .....

When a baby is born, it is completely dependent on its parents. Without parents or another adult to care for it, a baby will die. And yet, from the second that totally dependent baby is born, it is moving from complete dependence toward independence. Your job as a parent is to ensure that the journey is successful. First, you feed your baby and change its diapers. Soon, though, she will be feeding herself and using the bathroom. Before you know it, she will be dressing herself and heading off to school. By encouraging your child and setting up an environment in which she can make positive contributions, you will be giving her the tools she'll need to be successful in the wider world of school, friendships, and adult life. Certainly all parents want their children to be successful. At the same time, it can be difficult to accept a child's growing independence and separation from you. Self-observation can be useful here. For example, parents often carry out tasks for a child when the child is quite capable of doing these things herself. Some parents also encourage their child's dependence unnecessarily, to prolong their own feelings of importance and being needed.



## A CLOSER LOOK...

### Applying key principles in this episode .....

#### Managing yourself .....

#### *Marina Wins Every Time*

Karen wants Marina to manage herself well while the two make cookies together. For Karen, this means that Marina should be able to stick to her agreement that she won't eat the ingredients or cookie dough while they're baking. Marina repeatedly violates her agreement. She snitches sugar when Karen isn't looking and eats the cookie dough while it's being made. Marina pushes the limit every chance she gets and doesn't take her agreement with her mother seriously. She even acknowledges to Dr. Morse that she likes to get caught and uses crying to get her mother to give in. But where has Marina learned so well that she doesn't need to stick to her agreements? From her mother. Karen establishes rules and sets up agreements with Marina. When Marina deliberately violates them, Karen reminds and threatens, but doesn't follow through with a reasonable consequence. In some cases, she doesn't follow through out of desire to be fair (she doesn't want Marina to have to wash her hands again if she had really washed her hands). At other times, she is trying to avoid a conflict with Marina. If Karen were to manage herself better by following through consistently, do you think Marina would continue to push the limits and manipulate Karen by whining, crying, and throwing tantrums?

## Understanding the child's goal .....

### *The Last Word*

Marina has Karen well-trained. She engages her mother in a conversation about whether she washed her hands or not, and ends up not washing her hands. When she eats fruit salad with her fingers, which she knows is against the rules, she gives her mother the satisfied look of a winner. She sneaks baking ingredients and cookie dough, but not very secretly. It's obvious she's doing it so her mother will see. Marina is clearly breaking the rules and gets a lot of attention for her uncooperative behavior: She gets repeated reminders and threats but never experiences an undesirable consequence. When Karen finally does stick to the consequence that bakers who eat dough don't get to lick the bowl, Marina has the last word by throwing a prolonged temper tantrum. If she doesn't get to lick the bowl, she is at least going to make Karen's life miserable. Marina is seeking influence and control by pulling Karen into power struggles. She even resorts to revenge when she throws a tantrum: If her goal is to make Karen feel guilty, she succeeds.



## Moving from dependence to independence .....

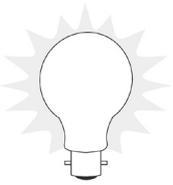
### *Marina in the Crystal Ball*

Marina has learned a number of strategies that will not serve her well as she moves outside her family circle. Nor will they be useful strategies as an adult. She has learned that she can often get what she wants by agreeing to something, then doing the opposite, either covertly or blatantly. She can also get what she wants by being sneaky, or if all else fails, throwing a tantrum with the hope of intimidating others into giving in. Would you want a friend, classmate, spouse or co-worker with these traits? Karen is doing Marina a disservice by letting her develop habits and attitudes now that will be problematic for her later in life. Much of Marina's inappropriate attention-seeking and bids for power reflect her discouraged efforts to influence the family. Karen's job is to turn that around and help Marina find a way to make a constructive contribution so that she can move out into the world as a productive, positive child and adult. Karen can begin to turn things around right away by letting Marina know she notices and appreciates her whenever she is being cooperative or helpful. In addition, Karen needs to follow through consistently, be willing to let Marina experience some disappointment, and stop backing down to avoid a conflict. This will open the door for Marina to find her place in the family through contribution and mutual respect. As the adult in the relationship, it is also Karen's responsibility to help Marina learn to stick to her agreements and deal maturely with disappointment when she doesn't get what she wants. Look into the crystal ball of your child's future. Will the strategies he's learning in your family now serve him well in the wider world of school, work and relationships later in life.



### Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Being overly concerned with fairness can get in the way of being consistent.
- Giving in to avoid fuss will only lead to more defiance.
- Take action rather than reminding or threatening.
- Be unimpressed with misery which might be for dramatic effect.
- Have confidence that children can learn to deal with disappointment.



## YOUR TURN .....

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### What would you do?

1. Can you think of a time when you have given in to avoid a conflict? How would you handle the situation now?
2. When you follow through with a consequence that your child knows has been established, how do you feel when he becomes upset or angry? If you feel bad or guilty, what can you do to ensure you don't act on those feelings but instead remain calm and matter-of-fact?
3. The next time your child tries to be influential by pulling you into a power struggle, what can you do to sidestep it?



A tantrum is useless without an audience.