

By Claudine M. Jalajas

Mom, Interrupted

Is my attempt at modern parenting an inspiration or a cop-out? I know what my mother would say.

In this kinder and gentler world of new millennium motherhood, I often wonder if we go too far. Books on playground etiquette? Kiddy parties where parental drop-off is forbidden? Our kids are picking up on the fact that the question “Who is in control, the mom or the kid?” is not rhetorical anymore.

I am a prisoner—I have been for about 10 years now. You see: I have three children. There are days I feel like I’m in a hostage situation.

“Please? Mommy really needs to go for a walk—her thighs won’t stop jiggling!”

Negotiations are more like blackmail—my little darlings tell me they’ll behave if their demands are met.

“How about some Hershey’s Kisses? Ice cream? Money? Take a check?”

My children use sleep deprivation tactics on me with the skill of seasoned CIA agents. I’m convinced they are conspiring together.

“OK...tonight’s your night. Wake up at 2:00, scream about a scary dream and if you can, soak your bed straight through to the comforter.”

I don’t know how it’s happened but I don’t think I’m the one in control around here.



“When I Was Your Age....”

Between the ages of 7 and 20, I frequently heard my mother say, “When I was your age we had respect. I would have never:

Talked to my mother like that;
Let my mother carry in the groceries;
Left the house without making my bed;
Helped myself to food in the fridge without asking.”

These were just a few of many things that annoyed my mother about me (or my brothers). While to her I may have seemed attentive and properly contrite, on the inside my eyes were rolling so fast I was making myself dizzy.

Honestly, I had a healthy fear of my mother. She never hit me or even threatened to, but she still managed to wield a lot more power over me than I have over my own children. I wonder if other mothers out there feel as inept as I

do. How is it that I kept my toys in my bedroom, made my bed before going to school in the morning, put my dirty clothes in the hamper, and ate whatever was on my plate without question? (Except liver and onions—I have to admit she cut me some slack on that one.)

I ask very little of my children: Hang up your coat when you come in, put your shoes in your closet, put your dirty clothes in the hamper, and eat your dinner without whining or asking for an alternative. If I get one out of the four listed above, I call it a good day.

What Happened?

In the past few weeks I've polled family and friends about their mothers and raising their own children.

Many of the people I surveyed felt that money, or the lack of it, makes a big impact on parenting. One person said, "It was no-nonsense parenting back then. If you didn't potty train your child at 2, it meant a lot more diaper washing. You ate what was put in front of you because there wasn't a lot of choice anyway."

I live in a fairly affluent part of the country and most of my friends are particularly well off, with large

I ask very little of my children:

Hang up your coat when you come in, put your shoes in your closet, put your dirty clothes in the hamper, and eat your dinner without whining or asking for an alternative. If I get one out of the four listed above, I call it a good day.

homes, professionally landscaped properties, and all the hired help you need to keep the home looking showroom quality. I'm not one of them—but we do OK. Honestly, my kids don't suffer much or want for anything (anything that I can see) and yet they can still think of ways that other kids have more than they do. "Why can't

we have a giant finished basement with a big screen TV and a pool table like my friend Joey?" asks my son Luc.

"Because we chose to spend our money on a swimming pool and fun family vacations, that's why," I reply. End of subject...for about five minutes.

Paying the Price

I do most of my shopping online (which includes groceries). I used to like going to the stores but now I absolutely despise it. Could it have something to do with the fact that the kids are always with me? There are certain things I'd like them not to do and it's going to cost me:

Shopping List

1. Run away
2. Cause a scene (knock things down or climb under things)
3. Ask Mom 100 times if we can go now

My 4-year-old son Max is the biggest offender of those simple rules. He's caused a code yellow at Kohl's, climbed up inside and rocked the giant stuffed animal structure at The Disney Store, knocked down a huge display of individually wrapped paper towels at Wal-Mart, and has simulated a full-body football tackle of his older and much bigger 9-year-old brother Luc in the center of the sock aisle in TJ Maxx.

Everything I ever said I wouldn't do when I was a parent I've pretty much done, including bribery. Oh sure, call it "positive parenting" but let's call the kettle black, shall we? It goes something like this:

"Max, I'm begging you—please behave in the store."

Max tips his head to the side, glares at me through squinted eyes and asks, "Will you buy me a toy?"

"Yes, after I'm done with ALL of my shopping, we'll find you a small toy."

See how I hold firm? I insist I must finish ALL of my shopping before caving. Yeesh.



Who's the Boss?

The balance of power has shifted between children and parents, and the line indicating where one was the boss and the other one took orders has blurred. In my house, it's been completely eliminated.

"Can you take out the trash, Luc?" I ask with ample sweetness and a smile. Luc replies honestly, "No, I don't want to."

So then, at the end of my fuse, my own honesty answers—with one finger pointing to the trash, the other to the door, I speak my mind. "I don't care if you don't want to, you have to, young man!" The spirit of my mother comes through for me. But not often enough.

All of the people I interviewed said that their mothers were not their playmates—this was not dependent on whether they were stay-at-home moms or not. Regardless of their moms' work status, siblings were expected to entertain themselves and go out into the neighborhood to play with friends.

My kids do expect me to come outside and play with them. If they're in the house and bored, they ask me to play games with them. It would have never occurred to me to ask my mom to play with me, and I knew better than to say I was bored to my stressed-out and exhausted mother.

I do play with my children but there are many times that I just can't spare the time. Things need to get done. But I want to have a relationship with them well beyond my being their chauffeur and caretaker.

So Who Does a Better Job?

I don't ask my own mother about how she feels she did as a mom or what she thinks of my mothering style. Seems like a fairly loaded question and I'm not sure I want to hear the answer. I worry that my mother as well as my in-laws think the kids have too much freedom. They think I let them run me around too much, give them too many choices and (gulp) spoil them.

Most of the people I interviewed answered my



question, "Who is a better mother, you or your mother?" the same way: "We're all doing the best we can given the situation we're in." My personal approach to parenting is to "bob and weave." Just do whatever works and be prepared to change the approach many times—because no two kids are alike and every day is a new day.

You'd think that all this bobbing and weaving would firm up my jiggling thighs. It hasn't, but it sure does make life interesting.

Claudine is a freelance writer and part-time web developer who lives on Long Island with her husband and three children. She longs for the day when she can reach into the hamper without thinking, "Should I be wearing gloves for this?"