

Bad Attitude

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Arrogant

*Antidote: Humility,
Graciousness, Modesty*

"I'm so cool."

Dear Dr. Borba,

Our twelve year old is pretty bright and always has to let everyone know it. If anybody is wrong, look out: he can be merciless and really insulting about letting them know that he's right and they're wrong. I'm waiting for the day somebody just gets fed up and decks him. Is there any way to stop his know-it-all attitude? He's really turning into an arrogant little snob.

—Josh E., a father of two from Little Rock, Arkansas

Bad Attitude Act Out

"I'm so pretty, Mommy, I'm going to be Miss America."

"I knew that when I was five."

"Get real. I'm the one here with the smarts."

EMERGENCY ATTITUDE



Immediately stop reinforcing, putting up with, or encouraging your kid's overinflated notions about himself, or about you, or about your family. If you've been putting your younger kid on center stage to parade her talents and beauty (so that everyone "ooohs and ahhs" her every breath), then cut it out! If you've become a "praiseaholic" each and every time your kid kicks a goal, says a funny joke, ties his shoelace, and swallows, cease! If you've been tooting your horn about your family's status, fame, and fortune so when people see you they run, call a halt. If you've been listening to your kid boasting and bragging about her every little accomplishment and encouraging her to do so too, end it. Then pass your treatment on to your spouse, siblings, relatives, and friends so they can apply the same treatment as well.

To rein in older kids' arrogance, confront them with specific tasks that challenge their limits, even provide the possibility of down right failure. You could put them in a difficult situation with a tough job to do, and also expose them to the true genius of someone who knows a lot more than they do. Examples are cooking dinner for a soup kitchen; sewing a quilt for the AIDS project; building a low-cost house with Habitat for Humanity or a similar organization; doing a daunting intellectual exercise with a math prodigy; experiencing a rigorous outdoor experience such as Outward Bound; or painting with a gifted artist. Choose an activity designed to help your kid recognize his limits, and create a rare humbling moment when he realizes he isn't the best in everything.

He's such a "Know-It-All." "Might as well call her 'Little Miss Smarty Pants.'" "He's such a Little Snot." "What a Smart Aleck!" "She's turning into such a snob."

Could any of these terms describe your kid? If so, beware: no matter what variety of language, they are all labels for the same bad attitude: Arrogance. Warning: the attitude is spreading, and even the younger set is affected by the Big Brat Factor these days.

Arrogant kids have somehow acquired the notion that they are better than others, and they make sure everyone knows it. Their attitude has one goal: making sure the other guy clearly recognizes the message: "I'm better than you." And that also implies—at least in her mind—that everyone else is inferior, and that includes *you*. After all, if she is the Know-It-All, then you're the Know Nothing. We're talking plain arrogance, and it's anything but becoming. That's why kids with arrogant attitude are also self-centered, rude, competitive, and selfish (not to mention very unpopular with all those poor souls on the receiving end).

When kids are little, we may think it's cute when they volunteer all the answers or have a sarcastic comeback. The mistake is thinking they are clever, funny, or even "beyond their years." But beware: you're really dealing with the early stages of arrogance. If not put in her place, the young smart aleck can turn into an older arrogant know-it-all. The simplest cause is that we've mislabeled their smart-aleck attitude as clever or witty: in reality, there's really nothing cute or witty about it in the least. Their snide remarks and quick retorts are often pointed slams at another person or shameless attempts to get attention through laughs and being "cute."

There's another reason kids turn arrogant, and that's our fault as well. Our parental pride can take a turn when we begin showing them off by parading their talents. "Come on, Jenna, everyone wants to hear you sing." "Have we shown you Harold's latest report card?" Of course we're proud, but there's

a hidden danger in flaunting our kids' talents: they assume that the world revolves solely around them and they are better than others. There's also the danger that our kids will begin to think they have to keep performing, keep showing off their talents, and keep being the clown to gain our love or approval.

Now don't get me wrong: I'm not debating your child's intelligence, beauty, talent, or skills or doubting your pride in your offspring. She could well be a budding Einstein, the next Virginia Woolf, a young Wayne Gretsky, a future Jackie Joyner-Kersey, a potential Itzhak Perlman, or even the next Picasso or Frida Kahlo. And she may deserve recognition and acknowledgment for her strengths. But this issue is not about how bright your kid is; how good looking; how extraordinarily adroit her math, science, art talents; how proficient her soccer, violin, computer expertise; or how profound her beauty. Instead, it's all about her preoccupation of making sure everyone knows she's better than the other kids. Arrogant children's methods of letting others in on their superiority are usually quite tactless and *always* insensitive. After all, these children dwell on their *own* capabilities and are usually quite blind to those of others.

Certainly, no infant arrives diapered and arrogant. But somewhere growing up, these kids anointed themselves as the Better Ones. And there are many reasons. Unrealistic self-appraisals may have resulted from overly lavished parental pride (and usually with a blind eye to their kid's faults and behavior mishaps). Excellence in an area—academics, sports, music, the arts, or any other—may be such a prime commodity in these kids' homes that letting others in on those talents is valued. Or competition, one-upmanship, or winning at any cost (including the price of humility) may be the family mantra.

There always are deeper underlying causes to any bad attitude that often are overlooked. For instance, an arrogant child may attempt to make others think his ideas are better because deep down, he doesn't feel superior at all: in reality he feels inferior. But boasting or bragging is his way of trying to

convince others of his talents. He might be jealous or resentful of other siblings or friends, so to get back he has to play the “I’m better than you” game. Or he may feel his relationship with you or his other parent is contingent on what he knows or does instead of who he is. So he is forever trying to prove himself to gain your love or approval. It could also be a reaction to a critical or negative parenting style.

Whatever the cause, make no mistake: if this arrogant attitude continues, it can have deadly consequences. No teacher, coach, scout leader, or other child’s parent appreciates a kid with an “I’m superior” attitude. Besides that, what peer wants to be around another kid who tries to make him feel inferior? That’s why all too many arrogant children have such dismal social lives. What any arrogant kid desperately needs is a strong helping of humble pie, so make sure you give him a big piece soon. Make sure you teach him humility, graciousness, and modesty to replace the arrogance that will prevent good character and ultimate fulfillment.

BAD ATTITUDE ALERT

Before you attempt to stop your kid’s arrogant, “superior” ways, you need to consider where, why, and how this attitude evolved.

Diagnosis

These questions will help you better understand why your child is using an arrogant attitude and figure out what’s going on.

Why. Why is your kid arrogant? Think carefully about what may have caused him to have such a high opinion of himself—or might he be compensating for something he lacks? Does he really have something to feel superior about? Is he gifted in the area he professes to be so knowledgeable about?

And what makes him feel he is so superior? Are you praising and acknowledging that expertise so much that he sees only his strengths and overlooks his weaknesses? Is an arrogant attitude something that is valued in your home? Or are you being too negative and critical, provoking this defensive reaction, this compensation for your withering attacks? Does he see others bragging unduly about their strengths, and so he is modeling their attitude? Or might it be that he is really trying to compensate for feelings of inadequacy? Another thing to consider: does he hear you bragging about his “brilliance” to others, and so he feels he needs to provide you with more things to brag about? Why did he develop such a know-it-all spirit?

What. Are there particular things he is more arrogant about? Is there a special subject or area of expertise that he tends to be more boastful toward—such as math, science, or vocabulary? If so, what is it? Is there a skill or talent he is more prone to show off: hockey, flute, weight lifting, or horseback riding?

Who. Does he display the same arrogant attitude to everyone: friends, the neighbor kids, teammates, a coach, a teacher, relatives, siblings, you, or your partner? Are there some individuals he does not use his know-it-all ways on? For instance: *all* relatives or some; *all* friends or just some? *All* his teammates or just some? Why are some spared dealing with this attitude?

When. Is there a particular time of day, week, month, or year when he is more arrogant? Is there a reason? For instance, if it is at a particular time, could something—such as a musical recital, spelling bee competition, athletic tournament, school debate, or report cards—be coinciding? Also, about when did you first see signs of this attitude? Was there anything happening at the same time that might have triggered his know-it-all ways: a move, an overly competitive school, a pushy relative, a certain teacher?

Where. Are there certain places he is more likely to be arrogant: at school or day care, on an athletic field, with peers, at a musical concert, at home, at a store, at Grandma's? Why? Or is he arrogant every place and everywhere?

Now take a look at your answers. Are you seeing any predictable patterns? Do you have any better understanding of your kid's arrogant attitude and where it's coming from?

WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR CURRENT RESPONSE?

Your kid is right in front of you, and her arrogant, know-it-all ways are flying full colors. How do you typically respond? Do you reinforce her professions of greatness by agreeing with her? Do you encourage her by reminding her of other talents she has overlooked? Are you cheering her know-it-all ways because you feel it is a sign of high self-esteem?

If you don't approve of her arrogant attitude, what do you do (or do you do anything?)? For instance, do you let her know you don't approve by giving her one of your sternest looks? Yell? Lecture? Shrug? Remove a privilege? Raise your eyebrows? Do you ignore her attitude and hope it will go away by itself? Or do you let her know that she really doesn't have anything to be so proud of? Do you criticize? Humiliate? Compare her professed talent to that of someone else, such as a sibling, your partner, her peers, or even yourself?

What is the one response you have found does not work in stopping her arrogant ways? Write what you will never do from this moment forward:

I will not _____

FACING YOUR OWN BAD ATTITUDES

Where is your kid learning this attitude? Could it be from you or your partner? Tune into your attitude and that of those close to your child, and look for clues. It may help you discover what's triggering your kid's arrogance.

First, look at your own attitude, and think about the kind of example you are sending. For instance, do you brag frequently about your accomplishments or talents in front of your kids? Do they hear you boasting about yourself to your partner, relatives, or spouse? What about your spouse or relatives? Do they display this attitude?

What do your kids perceive you value more: personal character or personal achievements? Is your attitude in line with those values? Do you emphasize your family's social, financial, or professional status to your kids? Do you (and they) have the view that your family is somehow "better" than other families? Do you stress personal accomplishments, grades, athletic prowess, and test results so much to your kids that they might perceive they need to prove themselves in order to gain your love? How competitive are you about your kids and family? For instance, how important is it for your kids to be "better" than your friends' kids? Do you openly compare your kids' performance, grades, or capabilities to those of their classmates, cousins, neighbors, or friends?

What are your beliefs about how children acquire self-esteem? For instance, do you feel it is more a matter of nature or your nurture? Is self-esteem contingent on a child's personal accomplishments or a parent's acceptance, or both? Do you feel that arrogance is a sign of high, medium, or low self-esteem? Do you feel criticism lowers your child's self-esteem? Do you criticize your child's poor behavior or attitude? If so, how? If not, why? Might your response have anything to do with your child's arrogant attitude?

Is there anything in your own attitude that might be enhancing your kid's arrogance? If so, what is it? What is the

first step you need to take in yourself to be a better example of humility to your child?

I will _____

BAD ATTITUDE NEWS ALERT



A famous study found that nine of ten adults felt that as they were growing up, they had to display a high skill, talent, or special ability in order to gain their parents' love. Might your child be in this category? If so, it could very well be a reason for his know-it-all ways. Researchers also found that the need to demonstrate competencies learned in childhood remains a pattern well into adulthood. This time, though, the adult uses his profession as a means of gaining approval and accolades from loved ones. Once again, instead of feeling a sense of quiet, inner confidence in his talents and strengths, he must toot his horn and demonstrate them to others for approval. If this is the case, he is at high risk for developing anxiety, low self-esteem, and the fear of disappointment. Make sure your child knows that your love is based on just who he is—and not on that gold star, goal, SAT score, or great grade.

THE "DON'T GIVE ME THAT ATTITUDE" MAKEOVER

To eliminate your child's arrogant bad attitude, take the following steps.

Step 1. Uncover the Source

Here are some common reasons that your child may be so arrogant. Check off those that might pertain to your situation:

- She may feel the need to show off her talents, skills, or intelligence. Have you set a precedent in which your kids display their talents to friends, relatives, or one another?
- She may be jealous or resentful. Do you favor one child, or does she feel that you do? Do you compare her capabilities—academic, social, aesthetic, or athletic—to those of classmates, peers, neighborhood kids, cousins, or your friend’s kids?
- She may need attention or want to improve her social status. Does she feel the way to make friends is by “impressing” them? Does she lack social skills to find friends who accept her for herself?
- She may feel that this is the way to gain your approval. Do you emphasize the concept of “what did you get?” (grades, “gold stars,” goals, scores) to your kid? Do you reinforce or reward (such as with money or privileges) your child’s performance?
- She may feel “privileged” or “above others.” Do you stress your family’s status—financial, social, educational, professional—as being better than others?
- She may be self-centered. Have you made your child feel as though no one is as intelligent, talented, or capable as she is?
- She may feel inadequate. Is she trying to prove her capabilities to others because deep down she feels not good enough?
- She models what she hears. Does she hear other family members boasting and mimic them?
- She may be competitive. Is competition to be the best a priority in your house, and so she feels the need to prove she meets your expectations?

Identifying the specific reasons for your child's arrogant attitude will aid tremendously in changing it.

Step 2. Point Out Others' Reactions

A big part of changing any habit is for the offender to realize why he should change, and that's a problem with kids. They often have used the attitude so long that they're unaware that arrogance is a real turn-off and doesn't win them any points from friends, teammates, or adults. Help your child recognize how others react to his know-it-all superior ways. Here are a few examples of how you might do so with your child:

- **Ask: How would you feel?** "Sam came over to play, but you spent a lot of time walking him around the house and telling him how much bigger our house is than his. How do you think he feels? Do you think he'd like to come and play with you again?"
- **Point out nonverbal reactions.** "Did you see Kevin smirk when you talked about all your trophies?" "Sara rolled her eyes when you told her Dad makes more money than her dad. Did you notice?"
- **Role-play the other side.** "I heard you bet Meredith that you were smarter in math than she is and showed your report cards. Pretend you are Meredith. What do you think she'd like to say to you?"

Step 3. Emphasize Character, Not Performance

The point is to judge others not on what they have done but based on who they are. That means you need to stress character, not performance. Start with your child, but because modeling is such an important way kids learn, do it also with your whole family. That way you will be more likely to really walk your talk. Here are some ways to emphasize to your kid that in the end, it's his character that matters most:

- **Stop rewarding; just expect and accept.** Stop bribing or rewarding your kid's efforts. The best self-esteem is internalized: your child must gain a sense of pride that he accomplished something for the joy of doing it and did it *on his own*. Also, find a level of expectation that is appropriate for each child's specific ability, temperament, and level of development. Some kids just do better than others at certain things during certain times.
- **Halt the "parading."** I know you're proud, but stop putting your kid on center stage to always perform. It's all right on the soccer field or in a musical concert, but lower the curtains in your home.
- **Emphasize effort, not the product.** Put your acknowledgments into the little steps and efforts your child makes, not the final result.
- **Stress unconditional love.** Continually emphasize to your child, "Who you are is what matters most. Not your grades, test scores, appearance, or friends. Win or lose—you are who I love."

Step 4. Acknowledge Others

Arrogant kids often focus on their own strengths and overlook those of others, so a big part of tempering your kid's arrogance is to help him recognize the accomplishments and achievements of others. Here are a few strategies to help your child start looking for the greatness in others and acknowledge it:

- **Greet others.** The most basic form of acknowledgment is a simple "Hello," "Good morning," or "How are you?" Promote their use by your child. Though they seem like such minimal gestures, simple salutations are the first steps toward helping kids become more tuned into others and less tuned into themselves.
- **Encourage encouragement.** Tell your child that one of the secrets of people who are appreciated (as well as liked) by others is that they frequently encourage others. An arrogant kid may not be aware of supportive, encouraging statements

that focus on building others up (instead of themselves), so brainstorm a few together: “Nice try!” “Super!” “Great job!” “Good game!” You might even post a list as a reminder. Then say the encouragers frequently so your child will “catch them” and then encourage her to start using them with peers.

- **Enforce the 1 x 7 Rule.** Encourage your child to praise a person’s specific strengths, skills, or talent at least once a day, every day for a week. It could be a family member, friend, or stranger just as long as your child practices the art of praising someone other than herself. Be sure to help your kid recognize the kinds of traits that can be praised, so model a few examples: “Great kick!” “You’re quite an artist.” “You sure know a lot about history!” At the end of the day, ask your child who she praised and how the recipient responded. *Hint:* This is also a great activity to do as a family: because everyone is on board using the same 1 x 7 Rule, there are more examples for your child to learn from.

Step 5. Reinforce Authentic Self-Esteem and Humility

Reinforce your child’s humility as soon as it happens, and let her know how pleased it makes you feel. Remember that true self-esteem is a quiet, inner contentment in which the child doesn’t feel compelled to let others know of her accomplishments and accolades. Nor does she feel the urge to compare herself to others or put the other guy down. Here are some examples:

“Jessica, I know how proud you must feel about your grades. I’m proud of how hard you worked. I also appreciate that you just told Dad and me and didn’t call all your friends this time.”

“Jeremy, I heard how you commented on how much more Dr. Hallowell knows than you do about migrating butterflies. I remember when you claimed to be the world’s foremost authority.”



The First 21 Days

Start a Humility Crusade in your home by encouraging all family members to look more for the good in others and less in themselves. Follow these steps:

1. Pick your favorite skill, hobby, or focus of interest, from Barbies to the Middle East conflict.
2. Find two or three experts who know a whole lot more than you do, and read up on everything they've said on the subject.
3. Have a family discussion on several of these topics that highlights modesty, focusing on other people's thinking, and serious learning.

Another aspect of the crusade could have these steps:

1. Focus on the specific content of an arrogant remark, like a claim to know more, or do better, or be superior in some way.
2. Dig down and find out the real feelings underneath. Does your child really feel that this is true, or is he only pretending?
3. If he thinks it's true, point out the reality of the situation: that he is not the best, doesn't have the most, and so on, and show him that it doesn't matter. You love him anyway.
4. If it isn't true, show empathy for his insecurity and need to compensate. Again, show him that you love him no matter what and find out what you can do to help him overcome the fear and anxiety that actually provokes this arrogance.

ATTITUDE MAKEOVER PLEDGE

How will you use these steps to turn your kid's arrogant attitude around and achieve long-term change? On the lines below, write exactly what you agree to do within the next twenty-four hours to begin changing your child's attitude so he is less of a know-it-all and more considerate of other people's ideas and opinions.

THE NEW ATTITUDE REVIEW

All attitude makeovers take hard work, constant practice, and parental reinforcement. Each step your child takes toward change may be a small one, so be sure to acknowledge and congratulate every one of them along the way. It takes a minimum of twenty-one days to see real results, so don't give up! And if one strategy doesn't work, try another. Write your child's weekly progress on the lines below. Keep track of daily progress in your Attitude Makeover Journal.

WEEK 1

WEEK 2

WEEK 3

ONGOING ATTITUDE TUNE-UP

Where does your child's attitude still need improvement? What work still needs to be done?

ATTITUDE MAKEOVER RESOURCES

For Parents

Everyday Blessings: The Inner World of Mindful Parenting, by Myla Kabat-Zinn and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Hyperion, 1997). Shows parents how to recognize who their children really are and be grateful for each child's uniqueness.

No More Push Parenting: A Mother's Tale from the Trenches, by Elisabeth Guthrie and Kathy Matthew (New York: Broadway Books, 2002). Great solutions for parents caught up by the need to push their kids to the top and those parents who don't want to push but are afraid their kids won't measure up.

Raising Confident Girls: 100 Tips for Parents and Teachers, by Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer (Cambridge, Mass.: Fisher Books, 2001). Excellent ideas to help your daughter gain authentic self-esteem and feel good about who she is without having to put on false airs. Also by the author for parents of boys: *Raising Confident Boys: 100 Tips for Parents and Teachers*, by Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer (Cambridge, Mass.: Fisher Books, 2003).

Worried All the Time: Overparenting in an Age of Anxiety and How to Stop It, by David Anderegg (New York: Free Press, 2003). Fascinating analysis on why anxiety-driven parenting may be doing kids more harm than good, and down-to-earth advice on how to pull back.

For Kids

The Emperor's New Clothes, by Hans Christian Andersen (New York: North-South Books, 2002). The all-time classic about the emperor who always wanted to put on airs to convince his subjects of his greatness. Ages 4 to 8.

Kissing Coyotes, by Marcia K. Vaughan and Kenneth Spengler (Illustrator) (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Rising Moon, 2002). Jack Rabbit boasts idly without much consideration for how he might actually accomplish the feats that he brags about. One day he goes a little too far in his claims, and his desert friends have had enough. Ages 4 to 8.

The Tower: A Story of Humility, by Richard Evans (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001). Determining that greatness means having everyone look up to him literally, a proud young man in long-ago China builds a tower and isolates himself from his fellow villagers. Loneliness is a small price to pay, and anyway, "Why would he want to associate with those so much lower than himself?" A wonderful lesson in humanity. Ages 4 to 8.

Pride and Prejudice, by Jane Austen (A & E, 1995). The filmed version of Jane Austen's classic novel about the prejudice that occurred between the nineteenth-century classes and the pride that would keep lovers apart. Look carefully at the "supposed arrogance" of a few of the characters, particularly the uncle. What becomes apparent at the end is that some people put on airs to cover up insecurities or traumatic earlier experiences. A good lesson for us all. Ages 10 up.