What is a spoiled child?

A spoiled child is undisciplined, manipulative, and unpleasant to be with much of the time. He/she behaves in many of the following ways by the time he/she is 2 or 3 years old:

- Doesn’t follow the rules or cooperate with suggestions
- Doesn’t respond to “no,” or “stop,” or other commands
- Protests everything
- Doesn’t know the difference between needs & wishes
- Insists on having his/her own way
- Makes unfair or excessive demands on others
- Doesn’t respect other people’s rights
- Tries to control people
- Has a low tolerance for frustration
- Frequently whines or throws tantrums
- Constantly complains about being bored

What is the cause?

The main cause of spoiled children is lenient, permissive parenting. Permissive parents don’t set limits and they give in to tantrums and whining. If parents give a child too much power, the child will become more self-centered.

Such parents also rescue the child from normal frustrations. Sometimes a child is cared for by a nanny or babysitter who spoils the child by providing constant entertainment and by giving in to unrealistic demands.

The reason some parents are too lenient is that they confuse the child's needs (for example, for feeding) with his wishes (for example, for play). They don't want to hurt their child's feelings or hear him cry. They may choose the short-term solution of doing whatever prevents crying, which, in the long run, causes more crying.

A child's ability to cry and fuss deliberately to get his way usually begins at about 5 or 6 months of age.

There may be a small epidemic of spoiling in our country because some working parents feel guilty about not having enough time for their children. To make up for this, they spend their free time together trying to avoid the friction that setting limits might cause.

The difference between giving children the attention they need and spoiling them can be unclear. In general, attention is good for children. However, it can become harmful if it is excessive, given at the wrong time, or always given immediately. Attention from a parent is excessive if it interferes with a child's learning to do things for him/herself and deal with life's frustrations.

Giving attention when you are busy because your child demands it is an example of giving attention at the wrong time. Another example is when a child is throwing a tantrum and needs to be ignored. If attention is always given immediately, your child won't learn to wait.

Some parents worry about holding and cuddling as a form of attention. Holding babies is equivalent to loving them. In many cultures, parents hold their babies much more than we do in this country. Lots of holding does not spoil a child.
How long does it last?
Without changes in child rearing, spoiled children run into trouble by the time they reach school age. Other children do not like them because they are too bossy and selfish. Adults do not like them because they are rude and make excessive demands. Eventually spoiled children become hard for even their parents to love because of their behavior.

Because they don't get along well with other children and adults, spoiled children eventually become unhappy. They may show decreased motivation and perseverance in their schoolwork. There is also an association with increased risk-taking behaviors during adolescence, such as drug abuse. Overall, spoiling a child prepares a child poorly for life in the real world.

How do I prevent my child from becoming spoiled?
1. Provide age-appropriate limits and rules for your child.
   Parents have the right and the responsibility to take charge and make rules. Adults must keep their child's environment safe. Age-appropriate discipline must begin by the age of crawling. Hearing "no" occasionally is good for children. Children need external controls until they develop self-control and self-discipline. Your child will still love you if you say "no" to him/her. If your kids like you all the time, you're not being a good parent.

2. Require cooperation with important rules.
   Your child must respond properly to your directions long before he starts school. Important rules include staying in the car seat, not hitting other children, being ready to leave on time in the morning, going to bed on time, and so forth. These adult decisions are not open to negotiation.

   Do not give your child a choice when there is none. Give your child a chance to decide about such things as which cereal to eat, which book to read, which toys to take into the tub, and which clothes to wear. Make sure your child understands the difference between areas in which he has choices and areas in which he/she does not.

   Try to limit your important rules to no more than 10 or 12, and be willing to take a firm stand about these rules. Also, be sure all of your child's adult caretakers enforce your rules consistently.

3. Expect your child to cry.
   Distinguish between your child's needs and wishes.

   Needs include relief from pain, hunger, and fear. In these cases, respond to crying immediately. Other crying is harmless and usually relates to your child's wishes. Crying is a normal response to change or frustration. When crying is part of a tantrum, ignore it. There are times when you will have to withhold attention and comforting temporarily to help your child learn something that is important (for example, that he/she can't pull on your hair or earrings).

   Don't punish your child for crying, call him/her a crybaby, or tell him/her he/she shouldn't cry. Avoid denying him his feelings, but don't be moved by his crying.

   Respond to the extra crying your child does when you are tightening up on the rules by providing extra cuddling and enjoyable activities when he is not crying or having a tantrum.
4. **Do not allow tantrums to work.**
   Children throw temper tantrums to get your attention, to wear you down, to get you to change your mind, and to get their own way. Crying is used to change your "no" to a "yes."

   Tantrums may include whining, complaining, crying, breath holding, pounding the floor, shouting, or slamming a door. As long as your child stays in one place and is not too disruptive or in a position to harm him/herself, you can safely ignore him during a tantrum. By all means, don't give in to tantrums.

5. **Don't overlook discipline during quality time.**
   If you are a working parent, you will want to spend part of your free time each day with your child. This time needs to be enjoyable, but also reality-based. Don't ease up on the rules. If your child misbehaves, remind him of the limits. Even during fun activities, you need to enforce the rules.

6. **Don't try to negotiate with young children.**
   Don't give away your power as a parent.

   When your child reaches the age of 2 or 3 years, have rules, but don't talk too much about them. Toddlers don't play by the rules. Young children mainly understand action, not words.

   By age 4 or 5, your child will begin to respond to reason about discipline issues, but he/she still lacks the judgment necessary to make the rules. During the elementary school years, show a willingness to discuss the rules.

   By age 14 to 16, an adolescent can be negotiated with as an adult. You can ask for his input about what limits and consequences are fair (that is, rules become joint decisions).

   The more democratic a parent is during a child's first 2 or 3 years, the more demanding the child tends to become.

   In general, young children don't know what to do with power. Left to their own devices, they usually spoil themselves. If they are testing everything at age 3, it is abnormal and needs help. If you have given away your power, take it back (that is, set new limits and enforce them). You don't have to give a reason for every rule. Sometimes it is just because "that's the rule."

7. **Teach your child to cope with boredom.**
   Your job is to provide toys, books, and art supplies. Your child's job is to use them. Assuming you talk and play with your child several hours a day, you do not need to be his constant playmate. Nor do you need to always provide him with an outside friend.

   When you're busy, expect your child to amuse him/herself. Even 1-year-olds can keep themselves occupied for 15 minutes at a time. By age 3, most children can entertain themselves about half of the time. Sending your child off to "find something to do" is doing him/her a favor.

   Much good creative play, thinking, and daydreaming come from coping with boredom. If you can't seem to resign as social director, consider enrolling your child in a playgroup or preschool.

8. **Teach your child to wait.**
   Waiting helps children learn to deal with frustration. All adult work carries some degree of frustration. Delaying immediate gratification is something your child must learn gradually, and it takes practice. Don't feel guilty if you have to make your child wait a few minutes now and then (for example, when you are talking with others in person or on the telephone). Waiting doesn't hurt a child as long as it isn't excessive. His/her perseverance and emotional fitness will be improved.
9. **Don't rescue your child from normal life challenges.**
Changes such as moving and starting school are normal life stressors. These are opportunities for learning and problem solving. Always be available and supportive, but don't help your child with situations he can handle by himself. Overall, make your child's life as realistic as he/she can tolerate for his/her age, rather than going out of your way to make it as pleasant as possible. His/her coping skills and self-confidence will benefit.

10. **Don't over praise your child.**
Children need praise, but it can be overdone. Praise your child for good behavior and following the rules. Encourage him/her to try new things and work on difficult tasks, but teach him/her to do things for his/her own reasons too. Self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment come from doing and completing things that he/she is proud of.

Praising your child while he/she is in the process of doing something may cause him/her to stop at each step, expecting more praise. Giving your child constant attention can make him/her praise-dependent and demanding.

Avoid the tendency (especially common with the first-born) to over praise your child's normal development.

11. **Teach your child to respect the rights of adults.**
A child's need for love, food, clothing, safety, and security obviously come first. However, your needs are important too. Your child's wishes (for example, for play or an extra bedtime story) should come after your needs are met and as time allows. This is especially important for working parents where family time is limited.

Both the quality and quantity of time you spend with your child are important. Quality time is time that is enjoyable, interactive, and focused on your child. Children need some quality time with their parents every day. But spending every free moment of your evenings and weekends with your child is not good for your child or for you.

You need a balance to preserve your mental health. Scheduled nights out with your spouse or friends will not only nurture your adult relationships, but also help you to return to parenting with more to give. Your child needs to learn to accept separations from his/her parents. If he/she isn't taught to respect your rights, he/she may not learn to respect the rights of other adults.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?
Call during office hours if:
- You feel your child is becoming spoiled.
- You and your spouse often disagree on discipline.
- Your child doesn't improve 2 months after you have tightened up on the limits you set.
- You have other questions or concerns.