

Circumstantial Expectations and Competing Priorities

By Daryl Wingerd



Parents, have you established “circumstantial expectations” for your children’s behavior? In other words, do you train and expect your children to adjust their behavior in different settings and circumstances? Are your children being trained to understand the concept of “competing priorities”? Are you teaching them that while their own preferences and felt needs are not unimportant, they are not always the highest priority in the moment? If so, you are on the right track.

Children are blessings from God. They should be loved, cared for, nurtured, and cherished. Parents (and others) should be patient with children as they grow in stature and maturity. But parents should also train their children from a young age to understand that the world does not revolve around them—that their greatest obligation is not to seek their own satisfaction, but the wellbeing of others. These are tough concepts for little ones, but crucial to learn early, nonetheless.

Sadly, our culture’s approach to the training of children has shifted dramatically over the past half-century or so, and not in a positive direction. Many parents, in moving away from the older standard that said “children should speak only when spoken to” (which was perhaps a bit excessive in the opposite direction) have adopted the modern standard in which children are typically allowed to dominate the setting according to their childish impulses, preferences, and felt needs.

This unfortunate trend is often on display, for example, in settings where one family invites another family over for dinner. The goal is to get to know each other better, but the children of one family (or sometimes both!) are so loud, or so disruptive, or so greedy for their parents’ attention, that the adults spend the entire evening trying to talk over the din, or refereeing conflict, or dealing with interrupting demands for immediate attention. The result is that the purpose for getting the two families together never happens. No meaningful adult-to-adult communication ever had a chance. Before you know it, it’s bedtime so the guest family leaves, and the only thing learned about the other family is that there is a child-training deficit.

Another setting in which the wrong (i.e., the modern) philosophy can cause trouble is in the meetings of the local church. When adult believers are unable to engage in meaningful conversation or Bible study due to excessive noise, disruption from children, or childish interruptions, important aspects of Christian fellowship are hindered. Something is wrong if this is the norm.

If you are a parent of young children, how can you address this issue? On Sundays you could always send them off to “children’s church” (if your church offers such a program). When visiting another family you could play a movie for the children while the adults talk. While these solutions are not wrong or inappropriate, they are also not helping you address the actual issue. They are not helping you train your children. They may actually be hindering that process by masking the need for training and correction.

Consider three ways for you and your children to understand and accept the concepts of **circumstantial expectations and competing priorities**:

Train your children at home for the way you expect them to behave in other settings. For example, establish regular times of family Bible reading where your children are expected to be still and quiet while they listen. Start with shorter times, but gradually extend them for the sake of extending their attention span and their ability to sit still. Don’t permit them to interrupt you at home when you are talking on the phone or with your spouse. Instead, require them to wait politely until you are ready to hear their concern. Require them at home to say “please” and “thank you.”

Speak respectfully with your children about others who establish rules and expectations in their home or church setting that are different than your own household rules. Assure your children that you (not your host) will enforce those rules and expectations strictly when you are there.

Love other believers by training your child to be pleasant, obedient, and respectful. Never be neglectful in addressing issues of training or correction with your children, especially when they affect your brothers and sisters in Christ. Other believers will try to be patient with your children, but it is unloving for you to knowingly allow your children to try their patience.

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