

Self-Fulfilling Parenting

At a recent parent-child event, I observed a pair of four-year-old twin boys and their mother. These red-haired look-alikes were a delight to watch until I realized that one of them was displaying some spectacularly bad behavior.

I wandered over to the beleaguered mother to see if I could help. The misbehaving twin stepped up to me, beamed into my face and announced, “I’m the bad one! We think I have ADD.”

In that moment, I learned a lot about the prevailing dynamic in that family’s household. First, I learned that this little boy was remarkably bright and verbal. He also appeared to be quite energetic. No doubt, this little fellow was a handful.

But I also learned that the grownups in his life had been labeling him in his presence. Few four-year-olds would diagnose themselves as “having ADD” or even as being “the bad one,” for that matter. This young man was parroting what he had heard said about himself countless times.

While it’s true that he had a pretty active temperament, I couldn’t help but notice that his brother—unscathed by their mother’s judgment—also seemed to be a busy little boy.

Somehow, the roles had been cast in this family, and one child had been classified as “the bad one.” Without knowing anything else about how he is doing now, I can predict that he continues to struggle with behavior issues.

I sometimes wonder if parents understand the power they have to help children build their self-concept. Without a doubt, children become what we say about them. Parents who talk about how “bad” their children are in front of them are giving them a license (more—an obligation!) to behave in a “bad” way. Children have such utter confidence in their parents’ judgment that they believe the labels they hear at home.

When a child hears again and again that she is messy or lazy or selfish, she figures it must be true and embraces that characteristic as part of what defines her. Often parents’ well-intentioned efforts to correct their children have the opposite effect. If the child of a busy parent gets attention for being messy, why would she stop making messes?

Instead, parents benefit by reframing their comments to children, focusing on the behavior they hope to see. When children are noticed for doing things well, they’re motivated to do more.

With children you can expect bad behavior, bad choices, even bad stages. But in 30 years of working with young families, I’ve never met a “bad” child. Our words are the mirror our children face. When they look into them, what kind of person do they see?