



DON'T call me NAMES!

■ BY SUJATA VASANT DEWAJI

Casting a child in a role begins early in life and quite innocently. When you think of your childhood, do the 'names' that got tagged along with your formal name resonate in your mind? Is there a label that has become a part of your identity because it was given to you by your parents or teachers?

Maybe words like 'stubborn', 'careless', 'lazybones' or 'dreamer' described you. Often labelling starts with a harmless 'You are such a naughty child', if you

kept your mother up all night with your gurgling and feeding.

While growing up, the habits perhaps got spoken about thus - "Why are you always untidy?" or "You are so slow!" Soon, your behaviour was questioned. "You should not be selfish" and "How

can you be so irresponsible?" Or your personality was probably being evaluated - "Don't be shy" or "If you remain so meek, you will never do anything in life." Maybe you

even got tagged positively—"She is the beauty of our family" or "He is a good boy as he's always studying."

When you look at yourself in the mirror, what do you see? Do you see yourself the way your parents saw you? Did it have an effect on you then and is it affecting your life now?

DIFFERENT LIVES

Kajal Sinha is a 43-year-old housewife, who earlier worked with an NGO. She has two daughters (13 and 9). Ajay Devnath (48) is working with an MNC and has a daughter (16) and a son (13). Both Kajal and Ajay are parents, who were typically labelled when they were young. They share with us how they were slotted into a role and how it affected their lives. Now, they ensure that they are not making the same mistakes with their children.

KAJAL: “For as long as I remember, my family always called me a scatterbrain and said that I could not be trusted to act responsibly. I lost innumerable lunch boxes, forgot things on the stove, forgot my books at home, even forgot to complete my exam papers! When I left home and stayed in a hostel, I was on my own and had to manage my life. With the change in environment, I became a very organized and meticulous person. Those who knew me in college would not believe that I was considered absent-minded! And yet, every time I came home, I reverted to my earlier behaviour. With my parents, I live up to what they believe about me – Kajal is a scatterbrain.”

AJAY: “I am the oldest in my family. Even though I am only a year older than my brother, I was always told that I was the ‘big brother’ and the ‘man of the family’ after my dad. I needed to take care of my little brother and the family. I had to take him wherever I went and was reprimanded when he got into trouble! Being ‘big’ was to be ‘responsible’. The ‘responsible’ label got weaved into other spheres of life – my studies, choosing a ‘good’ career, and many such things. I felt overwhelmed and many a time, it was a burden to be that person. I still feel that I cannot afford to slip up and feel very guilty if I

do. I do not like to show frustration and anger, but sometimes I feel that I will explode.”

When children receive a label from a person of authority such as a teacher or parent, they often take that label to heart and it becomes a part of their identity for the rest of their lives.

Different ways parents label their children:

1 “You know, Anup is so careless. He is always losing his pens and books. He forgets to do basic things at home. We keep reminding him, but the more we tell him, the more he keeps doing it!”

2 “Meenu is really stubborn. If she wants to do something, she has to do it that very moment, and if she does not want to eat or do something, she won’t budge.”

3 “Veena is so dependable. You can trust her to do whatever you tell her.”

As these statements show, the parents have observed their children’s strengths and weaknesses and labelled them. When parents are told by our forum that they are casting the children into fixed, narrow roles, they generally exclaim, “Can’t we even say anything about our children? We are only telling you what we see. Are you implying that we should not point out what is wrong with them? Then how will they know what they need to do to change? They will be like this all their lives. And why can’t we praise them? Isn’t that a good thing?”

WHY LABELLING IS NOT A GOOD IDEA

Labelling limits a child’s growth.

Of course, a parent can describe his child - it is natural. But one needs to reflect on the purpose of that observation. Is it merely an observation or a judgment? Is it to help the child grow, or is it limiting his growth?

Dorothy Briggs, the author of *Your Child’s Self-Esteem*, says a child is born with no image of himself. His parents are his mirrors and so the image that is presented to him is what he believes to be true of him. He begins to live up to that image.

We point out our children’s weaknesses with the best of intentions to help them improve. But, in reality, our actions have the opposite effect. The label often stays with him for life.

We need to believe that the traits the child currently possesses will change as he grows, in accordance with his environment.

Anup has been told that he is careless and forgetful and cannot be trusted to do anything. Now, this is what he believes he is, and subconsciously he will live up to this. He does not even realize it because in his mind, he is already a careless child. Without even being aware, he will continue to lose and forget things. Anup feels hurt and upset that he is constantly criticized and blamed. Instead of focusing on how to learn and change, he focuses on his feelings of resentment.

Even positive labels are a burden on the child as he now feels compelled to live up to those expectations. The responsible child feels that if he does not take responsibility, he will not be loved as much. The bright child has ►►

to keep up with his grades. When parents want Veena to be forever dependable, it is too much for her to bear. Can she be like any other normal person who can sometimes not do things because she does not want to?

WHAT WE CAN DO

Can we help the child see herself in a different light? How can we encourage the child to move away from playing the role? Let us see how Meenu's parents can help her.

Look at each trait in a new way.

Let us look at Meenu's stubbornness differently – Meenu is strong-minded, independent thinking and determined. With the help of her parents, Meenu needs to learn to be understanding and to learn the importance of give and take. The parent, in turn, needs to believe that her daughter is capable of growing up into a considerate and thoughtful person. By building an image of her as being capable of cooperation, the parent helps Meenu view herself positively: "Meenu, you are strong-minded and I am happy you think for yourself. I am sure that as you grow,



you will learn to listen to the viewpoint of other's also."

Express your expectations.

"I know that you are crying because you are very disappointed and you really wish I could take you to the shop. I too wish I could, but it is difficult for me today. You are feeling angry right now, but I know that you will understand." Instead of pointing out that she is being stubborn, the parent expresses the behaviour she expects from the child.



Remind children of positive behaviour.

"Remember the day your friend Sneha came home? You wanted to play outside, but she insisted that you play caroms. You decided to play her game for some time and later you both played badminton in the lawn. Both of you ended up having a good time."

Let the child overhear good things about herself.

"Karthik, our daughter is a determined girl. She just would not give up until she finished that 500-piece Eiffel Tower jigsaw puzzle you bought her last month."

Model the behaviour you want.

"Meenu, you know

sometimes I prefer to do it my way, than to ask others. Hmmm, but maybe I should find out what the others want. They may have some good ideas too."

Allow children to experience different situations.

"Meenu, can we first stop at the laundry to pick up dad's clothes for his trip and then I'll drop you at Sneha's?" and "You were considerate and adjusted with the sudden change of plan. It became easier for me."

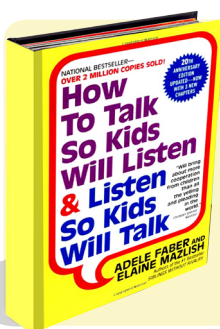
Highlight their individual strengths.

Comparing and praising the sibling on a particular matter in the presence of the child can make him feel less loved or appreciated. Help each child find his own strength. Emphasise that each one is different and that each has enough qualities to feel good about. "My daughter Meenu adores sports. But my son prefers reading."

These early years are important as the child is building up his view of himself and his self-esteem. Let us, as parents and teachers, believe in the child's innate ability to learn and help him grow. Let us do whatever is needed to eliminate the remnants of the labels from his life forever. ■

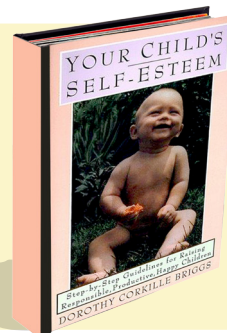
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GOOD READS



How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk

BY ADELE FABER AND ELAINE MAZLISH



Your Child's Self-Esteem

BY DOROTHY BRIGGS