

Break Kids Free From Limiting Labels By Marilyn Suttle



Do you label kids to fit a neat description? “Kevin is a charmer. Joey is quiet. Natalie is a rebel and Jessica is a brain.” It’s so easy to place kids into categories, to define them by a label.

Kids are not limited to one particular trait. They are whole people with a full range of traits and capabilities. The child you label “shy” may be slow to transition into new situations but becomes a social butterfly once she’s warmed up to her environment. Your “wild child” may have high energy but there are also times when he sits still. Labeling is limiting.

You and your child probably have different temperament traits. We all naturally differ in our levels of energy, distractability, adaptability, mood, intensity, sensitivity, persistence and ease of transitioning from one activity to another. Children have personality preferences but they are not limited by them. A highly intense child can learn to manage her reactions to fit into social situations. Instead of creating negative labels for challenging traits, look for the positive qualities associated with the trait. Instead of “bossy,” see leadership potential. Instead of “stubborn,” see determination. Instead of “scattered” see idea producers. Your understanding goes a long way in helping kids feel good about themselves.

You may feel it’s your duty to place your main focus on a child’s undesirable behaviors. When I’m tempted to do this, I remember a phrase by Dr. Haim Ginott, “The diagnosis becomes the disease.” In other words, when you name it, they claim it. Here are several compelling reasons for eliminating labels.

Labels may be inaccurate. Labels don’t recognize a child’s developmental stage or physical condition. For example, a “selfish” toddler may not be developmentally ready to share. A “whiney” child may be overtired.

Labels define your expectations. Kids think, “Since the adults in my life always call me irresponsible, that’s what they must expect from me.” Those expectations block kids from branching out beyond their label.

It’s hard to break free from a label. Once children are known as slow, bratty, wimpy or weak, people, including the kids themselves, tend to keep the label in place.

Good labels are limiting too. The “responsible” child feels pressure to perform and never mess up. The “adorable” child feels pressure to always be cute and perky, even when he doesn’t feel that way. The “nice” child may be reluctant to stand up for herself for fear of losing her label.

Labels stick. Some last a lifetime. Kids use labels like stupid, lazy and careless as weapons against themselves, damaging their self-esteem and limiting their full potential.

Labeling is like looking at your child through a filtered lens. You only notice what you’re looking for. As your child tries new behaviors, you miss signs of change by holding onto the old label. For example, Kelly thinks, “Dad always calls me a pig. He didn’t even notice that I cleaned up my plate after dinner. When I told him, he said, ‘What’s the big deal? You’re supposed to clean up after yourself.’ Then he complained that I left crumbs on the table. I never get it right. What’s the use in trying?”

Once you choose to eliminate labels, a new problem presents itself. What do you do instead of labeling? How do you break kids free from the behaviors that earned them their labels? Here are six parenting skills to free kids from the labels that confine them.

1. Look for positive behavior. Mom used to label Marcy as “irresponsible.” When Marcy remembered to return her library book, mom said, “Marcy, you returned your library book on time. That’s taking responsibility.”

2. Help your kids see themselves in new ways. Instead of focusing on Al’s “clumsy” label, mom gave him an achievable task that required fine motor skills. “Al, will you use this screwdriver to tighten up the loose doorknob?”

3. Let kids overhear you saying something positive about them. Jen was labeled a “liar.” When she told mom the truth

about breaking a dish, mom called dad at work to tell him how brave and honest Jen was for telling the truth. A man who attended one of my workshops shared this, “I always call my parents on Sunday. My kids come running when I start talking. They can’t wait to hear me tell grandma and grandpa all the positive things they did that week.”

4. Model the behavior you’d like to see. To help Rex break free from his “hothead” label, mom talked out loud when her computer froze up. “I’m so angry I feel like banging on the computer, but I won’t. That would only make things worse.”

5. Be a source of reference for your child’s finest moments. When Carlotta called herself “forgetful,” dad reminded her of the time she memorized that long Shel Silverstein poem when she was only six-years-old.

6. Clearly express your feelings and expectations when kids act out their negative labels. “Jack, when dinner is over I expect you to put your plate away.” “Star, it’s ok to be disappointed when you lose and I still expect you to be a good sport about it.”

By eliminating limiting labels and seeing the strengths in your children’s temperament traits you help to bring out the best in your children.

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