



Children in the Lead with Nowhere to Go

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

There is a growing problem among children that does not have a name. It is insidious and far-reaching, serving to make parenting and sometimes teaching challenging, if not a nightmare. The problem is that of dominance, when the natural attachment hierarchy is inverted and instead of children resting in the care of adults, they instead see themselves as the ones who should call the shots and tell us how to take care of them. Children who have risen to this alpha position can be consistently full of resistance to those who try to lead them. They are typically very frustrated, lashing out often, and can be filled with anxiety. They steadfastly see themselves as the boss of the house and don't understand when others try to take charge. The issue at hand for children in the dominant or Alpha position is not one of strength as it is often misperceived, but one of desperation. For some reason these children have lost faith in the providers in their life to take care and lead the way and their only recourse is to do it themselves.

There are obvious and not so obvious reasons why children lose faith in their providers. It is easy to appreciate how children whose parents are neglectful or consumed with their own pursuits and addictions can convey the message that the child is better left to their own devices. If these were the only conditions under which we were seeing an increase in children in the Alpha position then the problem would seem clear cut and obvious enough. Dominance issues in children can be found in loving and caring homes with parents who are dedicated to helping their children grow up to be socially and emotionally responsible individuals. What is giving rise to the increasing numbers of children in the dominant position and how can we start to make sense out of this?

In order to make headway we need to go back to the beginning and ask – what does a child need most in life? The answer is attachment, the invitation to exist in another's presence, to be seen and loved for who one is, and to feel a sense of belonging, loyalty, and similarity to those to whom one is connected. The critical piece that often gets missed in understanding attachment is that its role is to render a child dependent on those around them. This means being dependent on someone for their care and well-being, an incredibly vulnerable place to be! As an adult it is easy to lose sight of the vulnerability involved in depending on another but I am reminded of it every time I get into a taxi or an airplane. I find myself questioning whether I can trust this person to safely deliver me to my destination and take good care of me. It gives a whole new appreciation to the understanding of the "back seat driver."

When we are dependent on another we scan and look for signs that our trust and care are well placed. Is there something solid in this person that we can lean against? We might feel we convey this as parents but the more important question is whether our children see us this way? Some reasons why children might find it difficult to depend on their parents include being born too sensitive for this world. They see and feel too much, making it harder to convince them that someone can take care of all of them. They are described as intense children and parents often remark that taking care of them feels like double the work. Other potential reasons why children seek the dominant position in their relationships with adults stems from

too much separation-based discipline (such as 123 ‘magic’ and time-outs) or egalitarian parenting where we can inadvertently lose our Alpha position.

The biggest mistake we could make is to confuse their display of strength with maturity or a show of independence. It simply is not so – their dominance is an act of desperation. The critical issue when children are in the lead is that they cannot take care of their attachment needs and also attend to the business of growing up – there is a sacrifice play to be had. Attachment trumps maturation any day and the need to survive and take care of oneself rises to the forefront at the expense of rest, play, and further growth.

The good news is much can be done to restore our rightful place in our children’s lives. Parenting was never meant to be a nightmare and there is much hope to turn it around when it has become so. Underneath dominant behaviour is a child who is desperate to depend on and be vulnerable with someone who is responsible for them. Our task is to convincingly demonstrate through our behaviour that we are their best bet and are indeed the answer they seek. Our challenge is to regain our Alpha dance so that they can be freed from theirs.

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