

# Slate

## There Has Been No Collapse of Parenting

**The bossy style espoused by physician Leonard Sax may be bad for kids.**

By [Melinda Wenner Moyer](#)

Commanding kids to eat their vegetables is a clear example of authoritarian parenting.

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Did you know that some of America's most pressing ills—obesity, psychiatric illness, and our eroding educational system among them—have a single cause that can easily be fixed? I didn't, either, until I read Leonard Sax's new book, [The Collapse of Parenting](#). And you guessed it, dear parents: It's all our fault.

Sax, a family physician with a Ph.D. in psychology, bases his new theory on more than two decades of clinical experience as well as visits to schools and communities. But while Sax may have clocked a lot of hours with parents and kids, he sure doesn't frame his observations rationally or responsibly: He overgeneralizes and misinterprets, then makes ridiculous conclusions based on his own generational biases rather than scientific evidence. In fact, Sax's main premise—that the parent-child relationship has eroded over the past several decades—is backed by no research whatsoever. And ironically, some of his parenting recommendations are considered potentially harmful by psychologists.

Let's start with Sax's main claim. "We now live in a culture in which kids value the opinion of same-age peers more than they value the opinion of their parents, a culture in which the authority of parents has declined not only in the eyes of children but also in the eyes of parents themselves," he writes. In other words, in contrast to parents 30 years ago, parents today aren't commanding the respect of their kids—they aren't, to borrow some of Sax's emblematic examples, forcing them to finish their veggies or go on vacation with them or put down their iPhones—and that means they are turning today's youth into rude, obese kids with ADHD.

The problem is that scientists have been studying the relative influence of parents and peers on children and adolescents for decades, and they don't agree with Sax's diagnosis. "I have not seen any hard evidence to support the hypothesis that there is a secular trend toward greater peer influence," says Kenneth Dodge, a psychologist and neuroscientist who directs Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy. As far back as the 1960s, Dodge told me, research has shown that as kids graduate into adolescence, they start to follow the beliefs of their peers more than their parents, and "the peer-influence effect in early adolescence was as strong [then] as it seems today," he says. Psychologist Judith Rich Harris, who received a Pulitzer Prize nomination for

her book [The Nurture Assumption](#), which tackles the topic of peer versus parental influence, agrees: “Peer influence has always been important,” she says. “I’ve seen no evidence that this has changed in the past 40 years.”

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The evidence Sax supplies as proof that parents have lost all authority over their kids is laughable. Much of it is derived from family interactions he has overheard through the years. One key example was a mother who gave in to her son’s obnoxious demands for doughnuts at an airport before boarding a trans-Atlantic flight and who later did not discipline her rude teenage daughter for talking back. He cites this as clear evidence that the mom “had not encultured her kids into her own culture,” which “means that these kids will be ill-equipped to withstand the challenges of later adolescence and adulthood.” Those kids certainly don’t deserve awards for their behavior, but family airport interactions aren’t always an accurate reflection of true family dynamics; I have let outbursts go unpunished at airports that might have elicited different responses at home, because travel is stressful and exhausting for everyone. He tells a handful of other anecdotes, too, but each one involves a single family, so it’s ridiculous for Sax to extrapolate that these problems plague the entire nation—especially considering that most conversations were overheard in his clinic, which serves families in one of the [10 wealthiest counties](#) in the country. Other things Sax cites as clear signs the world is going to hell in a hand basket: Kids today wear obnoxious T-shirts, TV shows aren’t as good as they used to be, and Miley Cyrus. You’re probably starting to get the drift: The foundation for Sax’s theory is light on evidence, heavy on old fuddy-duddy.

If there’s no good reason to believe Sax’s contention that kids don’t respect their parents anymore, there’s even less of a reason to trust his advice on how to make things rosy again. Over and over in the book, Sax sings the praises of authoritative parenting, a style [first described](#) by developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind in the 1960s. It’s an approach that involves balancing parental warmth (called responsiveness) with limit-setting and control (called demandingness). It is often contrasted with the authoritarian parenting style, which is heavy on the demandingness and low on responsiveness. There’s also permissive parenting and neglectful parenting, which are pretty self-explanatory. Sax is right to support the authoritative parenting style. Research has shown that kids raised this way are the most well-adjusted, healthy, and successful.