Parental Respect is Earned, Not Given

Recently, I posted my top 10 tips for parenting success. Now, I am elaborating on each item on the list. Parenting Tip #3 is this:

Earn your child’s respect with active listening,

healthy boundaries, and direction.

The Wilson family only got to eat dinner together about three times per week because of multiple schedule issues. After school activities, early evening activities, varied work schedules for both parents, all conflicted with dinner at one time or another. For dad, Roger, who was away the most, that gave family meals together special meaning. Henry, age 8, conspicuously had his hands on his lap, under the table, while glancing back and forth from his meal to his lap.

“Henry, son,” dad started gently. “Whatcha doin’ there in your lap?”

Henry stopped short, head popping up. “Uh, nothing.” He took a bite from his plate.

“Does nothing include gaming on your IPhone while we are all eating dinner?”

“Nope.”

“Son, are you lying to me right now?”

“Uh, whatever. It’s no big deal.”

Up until now in the conversation, Roger had been making effort to connect with Henry and to gently re-direct him. Now, he has a choice point, on which hangs his son’s level of respect for him.

He could say, “Excuse me, young man. Don’t ‘whatever’ your father, and don’t lie to me.” That would command Henry’s attention, but likely generate fear, rather than respect.

He could alternatively say, “Son, our all having a meal together is really special to me because we don’t get to do it very often. When you try to game in your lap while we eat, it feels like you’re not here anyway. I miss you enough anyway. Can we at least enjoy this meal together? Give me your phone for now. You can have it back after we all finish the meal.”

Hopefully, this heartfelt response from dad would lead to Henry’s consideration and respect for dad’s wishes, not fear, indignation, and disrespect. This is a healthy boundary and direction. If Henry continued to fuss, Roger would switch to active listening to lower Henry’s emotional fever, and then return to his boundary and direction.

While we assume that our children respect us, respect is not a given. It is earned by how we treat them and how we relate to our children. It is also completely a two-way street. Times of mutual respect are bountiful in teachable moments.