

### Snow on Green Leaves

I live in a part of the country where we can usually count on four predictable seasons. Summers are warm. Leaves change color in fall. Winter is cold and snowy. Spring is marked by new growth. But last week we had snow on green leaves.

People in Minnesota talk about the weather a lot, sometimes as part of the greeting when they first see each other. “How are you?” followed by a comment like, “Bit on the cool side,” or “Could be warmer.” As if people were judging the day and finding it not all what they were expecting. You can imagine the shock and self-righteous indignation with snow the first week of October! “This isn’t right. Way too early. The leaves haven’t even finished changing color yet.”

Let me tell you what I think this has to do with parenting.

Too often parents get more upset or worried about an incident with their children than seems warranted. And the reason for some of this overreaction is that we are comparing (without awareness) our children’s behavior to some ideal. We compare and find their behavior to fall short of the standard. Then with that failure to meet the standard in clear view, we start to get worked up and before we know it we are overly worried or overly angry. Here are two examples.

Imagine a 6- or 7-year-old girl who brings a snack to her bedroom, hears her parent walking down the hall and tries to hide the packaging under the bed and promptly forgets it is there. The next day, the parent finds the “evidence” and the girl says something brilliant: “It wasn’t me. I don’t know how it got there.” Or, maybe an 8- or 9-year-old boy is all excited about a birthday party but right when it is time to go, feels nervous, changes his mind and says he doesn’t want to go.

Both examples are typical childhood events, frequently occurring and not remarkable in any way. The girl needs to be held accountable for her mistake, the boy needs a few words of encouragement. But here is where it gets tricky for parents.

What if the first parent compares her daughter's behavior to an ideal? "This is not acceptable. Don't lie to me, little girl." Or the boy's parent: "Something is seriously wrong. You can not just change your mind at the last minute." When parents make these kinds of comments they are clues to me that they are not staying connected to their child, dealing with the challenge of the day, comforting and disciplining, and accepting that parenting includes such times. These are the flags of judging and comparing, rather than accepting and staying connected. And that is when we get more worried and more angry than the childhood event requires.

Seven-year-olds make mistakes and lying to parents is an example of an age-appropriate mistake. Lying at a young age doesn't give us any data about whether there will be lying problems in the future. Nine-year-olds can get nervous before a birthday party and decide at the last minute not to go. And while that might mean they miss out on some fun, it doesn't mean they will spend years of their childhood hiding in their rooms with serious social problems. And there is definitely no advantage to bringing in a benchmark (e.g., 9-year-olds shouldn't renege on their word). *Parenting is what we do when they do what they do.* No sense getting upset about what is right in front of us. Better to stay connected with our children at all times and use what we can to teach what they need to learn.

Not so different from the weather. Almost everyone I talked to last week about the early snow was annoyed. Except for my wife, who kept saying the snow on green leaves was one of the most beautiful sights she had ever seen. Instead of wishing things were different, it is better when we just show up, enjoy the day as much as we possibly can, and deal with whatever the weather or our children have in store for us.

Dr. Steve Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*. Please check [www.drstevekahn.com](http://www.drstevekahn.com) for additional (free) articles about parenting or to learn more about the book, available both in paperback and as an audio book. Please feel free to share this article with others.