

Hecht: No one said life is fair

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(Photo: Courtesy photo)

I've got a rather precocious 9-year-old child in my acting class. Let's call her Argumentative Ally. Said child is a hawk on the lookout for fair and justice for all. She is quite diligent in her quest.

"That's not fair," she whinnies, glaring at me with eyes steeled for battle at the grave injustice I've wreaked upon the world. I'm surprised that she's decked out in a hoodie and a backpack, and not a black robe and a gavel.

But it's my fault. I get it. I've (unfortunately for me), created a chill atmosphere in the class where kids have no qualms about airing their grievances.

They got to go longer!

It was supposed to be my turn!

But you said we'd do that first!

What can make it worse is my periodic forgetfulness. If I happen to forget an aforementioned detail or parameter of any activity, I get it with both barrels from these persnickety pint-sizers.

Fairness issues with older children can get prickly too, if you let it, involving lengthy, "fact"-filled debate. At times, I'm so impressed with my kids' oratory and research skills, that I cave. It doesn't help that my teenage son sometimes has a lawyer fighting on his behalf (when she's home from college) for the times when I, the Mom, is being hideously "unfair." I'm surprised about this, since lawyers don't come cheap and he's supposed to be saving up for a car. Perhaps she works pro bono, but I'm not certain.

I, unfortunately, must settle for self-representation, but I still do pretty well, mostly because of my title, the one that starts with a "P" for Parent. When my side is accused of having a weak case, such as when the plaintiff is suing for additional screen time, I can always use the "because I'm the parent and I said so," defense. This is particularly helpful when it's dinnertime. A person can work up an appetite after an hour in court.

Meanwhile, I read a theory the other day that the need for fairness is "evolutionary," — that we are wired for survival and must stand up for ourselves to take care of our needs. I try to take this into account when I hear a child complain that "she got one more pretzel than me" at snack time.

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The concept of fairness differs, depending on the child's age and stage of development. For younger kids, fair means equal in a literal sense, with less gray areas. It may seem easier to make things equal for them, like giving both kids something new even though only one really needs it, or giving a present to a sibling when it's the other child's birthday. But rather than teaching the more complex and realistic nature of fairness, this can backfire with self-centeredness, entitlement issues and deep-seated discontent.

Instead, it's better to listen to and validate their thoughts and feelings about a perceived unfairness and in certain scenarios, help come up with solutions. Sometimes, the words "it's not fair" means "I don't like this." Talking about it helps process emotions, learn to delay gratification and better tolerate disappointment.

As always, we parents have to be patient. But sometimes, when a child is ranting about a questionable unfairness, we have to put on our headphones, load up Netflix and eat vast quantities of chocolate.

Because sometimes, life just isn't fair.

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