



## USEP-OHIO PARENT TIP: From Bossy to Balanced

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Karen is small for her age, but she towers over the boys she loves to play with at school, by telling them what to do and how to do it. At home she is a strong leader to say the least. Many exuberant three year olds become unbelievably bossy for a short time when they hit the fours. Karen is cooperative and helpful most of the time. But her confidence sometimes turns into dominance when it comes to the playroom at home and at school. She tells her three-year-old sister what to do and what not to do. Some of this behavior comes from “knowing the ropes”. Karen has expertise and skills she is proud of. She has been a good helper for her mother, following the birth of the new baby brother last fall. But she seems to feel responsible for telling everyone else the rules, and she becomes easily frazzled if things don’t go her way.

Michelle is eleven. Her parents were recently divorced, and she has many new responsibilities around the house. She is feeling very anxious about living in a new neighborhood, and taking care of her younger sister while Mom works longer hours. Mike is thirteen, the oldest of three boys, and dominates his brothers. He often ridicules them by pointing out their faults at home and at school. Both youngsters tend to try to “rule” over their siblings.

It is normal for youngsters to go through bossy stages as they develop into competent leaders. Birth order can account for some of the confusion that they feel. “I am the oldest, therefore I should be the leader.” “I should be the most responsible one.” “I should tell the younger ones what to do.” And sometimes, “Mom or Dad expects me to be in charge and keep the peace!” In the case of each of these three children, life circumstances also contribute to their bossiness.

*What can their parents do to help them relax and take a more cooperative, balanced role? First, reinforce the child for trying hard to be responsible and helpful, and ask how it makes them feel when the other children do not cooperate or obey their rules.*

“I know you are trying hard to be responsible. It sounds like they felt angry at you when you told them what to do. How did that make you feel?”

*Evaluate the situation, and try to change the dynamic. Karen needs more time to be a child, and would benefit at school if the teacher can arrange for her to have some attention away from the leader role. Michelle needs reassurance and would benefit from having an older child present when her mom is away, so she doesn’t have to be the responsible one. Mike needs more time with boys his age or older, and a chance to be one of the guys instead of the tough older brother.*

“Your brothers are trying hard to grow up. They want you to be proud of them, not to make fun of them. How can you help them to learn new things without feeling put down?”

Bossiness becomes caring leadership with skills developed through practice and encouragement.

**The reward for recognizing problems is satisfying time with our kids as we find solutions.**

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