



Guidance and Discipline of Children

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Being a parent today is one of the hardest jobs in the world! But if we remember that parenting is both an action and an attitude, it will become more manageable. If parents wish to change their parenting style or improve their disciplinary techniques, they need to examine how they “correct” their child’s “misbehavior.” They need to distinguish between effective discipline and ineffective discipline.

Discipline is effective when parents teach children self-control and other skills needed to develop successful relationships in the world. Through effective discipline, parents guide their child through the difficulties of growing up and demonstrate their sincere love and concern for their child’s well-being.

Discipline is ineffective when parents simply punish their child for misbehavior. Ineffective discipline typically places too much emphasis on correcting “bad” behavior instead of encouraging “good” behavior. Rather than being permissive, effective discipline combines reasonable firmness with parental warmth.

Rather than being restrictive, it demonstrates a healthy respect for children and enables them to develop healthy self-esteem.

With *effective* discipline, the child develops self-discipline, responsibility, and self-esteem; sees the parent as a source of strength; respects the parent; and learns through parental teaching and role modeling. With *ineffective* discipline, the child obeys only when authority is present; develops concern for personal safety; feels lowered self-worth; fears the parent; and conforms through training. The parent needs to ask, “Will the type of discipline I use encourage my child to learn to behave in appropriate and respectful ways?” and “Will my

child learn to rely on himself or herself rather than having to rely on me or other adults to tell him or her what to do?” If either answer is “no,” perhaps another form of discipline should be tried. In the long run, discipline should help children take over the responsibility for their own behavior.

Guidelines for teaching self-discipline

There is not one right way to discipline children. There are as many different ways as there are families. There are several useful guidelines, however.

Children want to know what to expect

Children want to know their limits. When you give children clear limits, they quickly learn the rules. They may try to get around your rules, but if you are consistent, they know just how far they can go. Tell your child what pleases you. Describe what is acceptable and what is not, and then stick to it. Give suggestions in a positive, helpful way. Sometimes a parent’s vocabulary is made up entirely of “don’t” and “stop that!”

Reward positive behavior

Children want to feel good about themselves and their behavior. When you reward a child’s positive behavior, the child will continue that behavior because most children want to please their parent. Don’t focus on what was not done well, but teach when the opportunity arises. Tasks well performed deserve praise!

The punishment should fit the crime

To be effective, rewards for positive behavior should be specific, and the same is true of punishment, especially

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in the discipline of young children. The task for parents is to select the most appropriate response best suited to the situation.

For each misbehavior, there must be a consequence

First, you can take away something that is important to your child. If your five-year-old left the tricycle outside instead of bringing it at night as he has been taught, take it away for a day or two. This reminds him that it must be taken in before dark. Don't overreact and take it away for a month, however. You can also isolate your child from the problem. For example, if your six-year-old continues to disrupt play with a younger sister by fighting and yelling, it might be appropriate to have her spend a short time alone—a time-out from a tense situation. When using this consequence, be specific about the reason; to a young child, even a few minutes can seem like forever. Set a timer for 5 or 10 minutes. When it rings, ask for a description of the misbehavior and then suggest that cooperative play may be more fun. A third type of consequence is a spanking. Although some experts believe it can be effective in stopping the behavior in the short run, it does not encourage the development of self-discipline. The child learns that hitting is an acceptable way of stopping a behavior. Whether or not you use spanking as a last resort, you must understand that a swat to emphasize a verbal reprimand is very different from a beating.

Provide a positive role model

A line in the song "The Cat's in the Cradle" says, "I'm going to be like you, Dad, I'm going to be just like you." And fortunately or not, it is mostly true. Why? Because the parent is the child's first and most significant teacher. It is the parent who sets the stage and provides the basis for most of the child's values and attitudes about life, society, other people, and one's self-worth. A household where love is openly expressed is one in which children flourish. Just talking about it is not enough. As a parent, you must model your love by your behavior to them so they will learn how to give and receive it. Do you let your children see warmth and respect in your marital relationship? Do you show delight when you greet your children in the morning and at the end of the day? Your actions to your spouse, friends, family, and children create an atmosphere for growth and development to take

place. "Do as I say, not as I do" is not an appropriate motto for families. To your children, your actions shout and your words whisper. In the words of an old Chinese proverb, "When I hear, I forget. When I see, I remember. When I do as I have seen done, I learn."

Respect your child as a person at all times

Mutual respect is the basic foundation on which all human relationships are nurtured. Since you are the adult, you must model respect for your child. This means you must act and talk with your child in respectful ways and not in a manner that hurts or "puts down" your child. How is this mutual respect translated into actions? By being polite and courteous, by saying "please" and "thank you" and "excuse me." These are common courtesies that we give to friends and often to total strangers but often forget to use with family members.

Apologize for your wrongful behavior

All of us have said something to our children we wish we had not said. All parents act in a disrespectful or wrongful way at one time or another. We try to do a good job of raising our children, but let's face it—sometimes we blow it. If you can say "I really lost my temper and I didn't mean to do it. I'm sorry," your child will better understand and accept your emotions and will respect you more. Most of all, your child will learn to say "I'm sorry" after making a mistake or hurting someone.

Use your authority compassionately

We learn ideas and accept values that are explained by people we respect and trust. The family is no different. In order for it to work, it must have strong, intelligent leadership combined with compassionate authority. Each parent asks, "Am I being too strict with my kids?" or "Do I let them get away with too much?" It is sometimes difficult for parents to take a stand on an issue and enforce a rule. The solution is to throw out those rules you will not or cannot enforce. Justify those rules that are important and explain why they are important. "Because I said so" isn't an explanation, it's a statement. Consider adjusting your level of firmness to the relative importance of the behavior you want your child to learn.

Separate the child from the behavior

Children who feel loved, successful, and competent usually have a positive self-concept. These children have

fewer problems in school, are less involved in delinquent behaviors, are less likely to be involved in drug or alcohol abuse, and are more likely to grow up to be mature, successful adults. When children hear negative criticism from an early age on, they develop very little self-confidence, which results in a low self-concept. Parents need to disapprove of an inappropriate behavior without disapproving of the child (“I feel frustrated when you leave your clothes in the middle of the floor because I spent some time washing and folding them. I want you to fold them and put them in your drawer. I want you to put the dirty clothes in your basket for me to wash.”). Always tell your children that you love and appreciate them, at least once a day. It’s important for children to know that their parent has a good opinion of them and loves them.

It’s okay to say “no” to your child

Some parents find this difficult, especially when both parents work away from home. Often the parent feels guilty for not being home at certain times. A “no” may cause sudden anger, loud wails, and accusations that “If you loved me, you wouldn’t say ‘no.’” When you do say “no,” state the reason for your decision. The moment you say “no” you set a limit, and there may be a conflict of opinion between you and your child. Effective discipline includes the right to say “no” to unacceptable behavior or requests, and to stick to it without apologies or uncomfortable feelings.

Be flexible as your child gets older

As children enter junior high school, they will discuss, debate, argue, and often hotly contest many decisions. Some of the rules established when your children were

younger will need to be changed, or at least opened up for discussion and negotiation. Although it may seem difficult, allow your child more freedom as responsible behavior occurs. This is how self-discipline is learned. But children will make mistakes—and you must support and encourage them, both during experimentation and mistakes and when the child achieves according to your expectations.

Use the “over-the-shoulder” perspective

When you discipline your children, imagine they are now adults and observing what you are doing. How would they react? What would they say about you? What would they have you do differently? The time to consider these questions is now, while you have the opportunity to become a “better” parent rather than having to face grown children and answer for past behavior that can never be undone. One father, in remarking upon his feelings when his children grew up and left home, said, “What really hurts like a knife wound in my soul are two things: that I behaved badly at times and said and did some things I wish I hadn’t; and that I didn’t spend more time with them, loving them, nurturing them, and at the same time being loved and nurtured. Now it seems there is an emotional gap between us that is uncloseable.” Our effectiveness as parents depends on our self-confidence, our willingness to learn and change, and a sincere valuing of children and ourselves. If the aim of discipline is to help children develop, you as a parent should try to listen to and understand what is going on behind your child’s words and actions. The best way to discipline is to prevent problems before they occur—by being in touch.