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Herbert G. Lingren

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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Discipline--An Effective Life Guide

Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist

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There is no doubt that discipline is needed in families. Society could not exist if people acted without concern for others. Why, then, is there so much disagreement about this subject? Parents often misunderstand and confuse the terms *discipline* and *punishment*. They see them as being the same thing but they are not.

The dictionary defines *discipline* as "a system of rules governing conduct." It is "training that corrects, molds, or perfects." In contrast, *punishment* is defined as "retributive suffering, pain, loss, or penalty." The term discipline has its origin in the word "disciple" -- a follower who learns from the teachings of another. Clearly then, the focus of discipline and punishment are quite different. Discipline implies a set of attitudes and behaviors that the teacher hopes the follower will acquire. It is a learning experience--not punishment, not tears--but a chance to learn how to live in a social world. Thus, punishment may be a part of discipline, but not the major part.

Purpose of Discipline

Parents want their children to grow up to be productive, happy and responsible adults. Thus, parents must take into consideration how to be effective in providing discipline.



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

On the other hand, discipline is *ineffective* when parents simply punish their children for misbehavior. With ineffective discipline, a parent frequently reveals a greater concern for establishing strict conformity to rules than for promoting the child's development. Ineffective discipline typically places too much emphasis on correcting "bad" behavior instead of encouraging "good" behavior.

Rather than indicating permissiveness, effective discipline combines reasonable firmness with parental warmth. Rather than being restrictive, it demonstrates a democratic respect for children and enables them to reach out confidently to others.

With effective discipline, the child:

- Develops self-discipline.
- Develops feelings of responsibility.
- Develops greater self-esteem.
- Sees the parent(s) as a source of strength.
- Respects the parent(s).
- Learns through education.

With ineffective discipline, the child:

- Obeys only when authority is present.
- Develops concern for personal safety.
- Feels lowered self-worth.
- Sees the parent(s) as a source of danger.
- Fears the parent(s).
- Conforms through training.

A parent needs to assume the role of the child and ask: 1) will the type of discipline I choose encourage my child to learn to behave in appropriate ways? and, 2) will my child learn to rely on himself rather than having to rely on his parents or other adults to tell him what to do? If the answer is "no" to either question, then perhaps another form of discipline should be tried. In the long run, discipline should help children take over the responsibility for their own behavior.

Qualities of a Good Disciplinarian

- Being an effective disciplinarian requires skill, patience and love. But there are four qualities to think about when we consider the characteristics of someone who is a good disciplinarian with children.
- A person who lets the child make some decisions and choices.
- A person who makes rules and expectations clear and understandable.
- A person who demonstrates appropriate behavior through speech and actions.
- A person who gives children freedom to grow, yet recognizes they need limits and guidance.

Guidelines for Teaching Self-discipline

There is no one way, and certainly no right way, to discipline children. There are as many different ways as there are families. However, there are several common discipline guidelines that have been useful to parents over the years as they try to teach self-discipline to their children.

Children want to know what to expect-- Children want to know their limits. When you give children clear limits, they quickly "learn the rules of the game." 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 your guns. Give your suggestions in a positive, helpful way. It sometimes seems as if 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 as well. When you reward a child's positive behavior, the child usually continues that behavior because, basically, most all children want to please their parent(s).



The parent, though, is often too general in reward-giving. For example, you might say "thank you for sweeping the floor." And your child may feel okay about that reward, but may not really grow from it. Instead, you might say, "Shawn, you picked up the paper, swept the floor with a broom and dry-mopped it. How nice it looks for our party tonight. Thanks so much." Shawn

knows exactly what was done because you've been very specific in your comments and appreciation. If Shawn has done a sloppy job or halfway job, you might have commented on the part that was done well--and then demonstrated how to do the rest just as well. Don't focus on what was not done well, but instead teach when the opportunity arises. Tasks well performed deserve praise, but be specific in describing the behavior.

Does the "punishment" fit the crime?--In order to be most effective, rewards for positive behavior should be specific, and the same is true of punishment, especially in the discipline of young children.

The task for parents is to think of logical ways they can respond to a child's misbehavior, and then select the response best suited to the situation.

There are many ways you can show your children that for each misbehavior, there is a consequence. First, you can take away something that is important to your child. If your five-year-old left her tricycle outside overnight rather than taking it in before going to bed like she has been taught, take it away for a day or two. This serves as a reminder that it must be taken in before dark. However, don't overreact and take it away for a month.

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, a suitable punishment might be that she spend a short time alone take a "time-out" from a tense situation. When doing this, however, be specific as to why because to a young child even a few minutes can seem like forever. Set the kitchen timer for five or ten minutes. When it rings, ask for a description of the misbehavior and then suggest that cooperative play may be more fun.

A third method of punishment is to spank. This is controversial because although some experts believe it can be an effective method of discipline, others believe it breeds fear and violence. While spanking may let you control the situation in the short run, you may not be encouraging the development of self-discipline. Whether or not you use spanking as a "last resort," you must understand that there is a "right" kind of spanking and a "wrong" kind. The wrong kind is a cruel beating. It fills your child with hatred and a desire for revenge.

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 parents are the child's first and most significant teachers. It is the parents who set the stage and provide the basis for most of the child's attitudes and values about life, society, other people and one's self as a person.

A household where love is openly expressed is one in which children flourish. Just verbalizing love to your children and spouse is not enough, however. As a parent, you must "model" your love so your children will learn how to both give and receive love. Ask yourself these questions do you let your children see warmth and tenderness in your marital relationship? Do you show delight when your spouse comes home? Do you speak tender greetings to each other, give thoughtful little surprises and show loving closeness?

These actions set an atmosphere in motion that encourages tender affection in your children too. The fact is, happy, loving mothers and fathers produce happy, loving children. Strictly child-centered or adult-centered households produce neither happy marriages nor happy children.

"Do what I say, not what I do," is not an appropriate motto for families. Why? Because to your children,

your actions shout and your words whisper:
When I hear, I forget
When I see, I remember.
When I do as I have seen done, I learn.
(Old Chinese Proverb)

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 pinches, hurts or "puts down" your child.

How is mutual respect translated into actions? By being polite and courteous toward each other. By saying "please" and "thank you," and "excuse me." These are common courtesies that we give to our friends and often to total strangers, but find them difficult to use with family members.

A more difficult respectful action is apologizing to family members, especially your child, when you are wrong. Most of us try to do good jobs and be effective parents, 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 understand and accept your honest emotions, and will respect you more for sharing them. Your child will learn to say "I'm sorry" when 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 is concerned with "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.

Throw out those rules you are unwilling to enforce. Justify those rules that are important and explain why they are important in terms your child can understand. "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. Sometimes parents make the mistake of being overly strict or overly permissive in the wrong situation.

Recognize the unintended effects of any form of discipline you use. What else is your child learning from your discipline?

Separate the child from the behavior--Children who feel loved, successful and capable usually also have a positive self-concept. These children have fewer problems in school or later in life. Many times, though, parents lump together the child's dirty clothes, messy rooms, shouting matches with siblings and others, and unthinking mistakes, with the child's personality. Their words often scold and lecture. "You are a dumb, stupid kid.... Can't you ever keep your clothes picked up...?" When children hear negative criticism from an early age on, they develop very little self-confidence which results in a poor self-image. Parents need to disapprove of inappropriate behavior, and also acknowledge and love the child. It's important for children to know that their parent(s) has a good opinion of them and love them.

It's okay to say "no" to your child--Although it may be easy to say "no" to other adults, parents may find it difficult to say "no" to their child. This may be because the parent feels guilty or because "no" causes sudden angers, loud wails and accusations of "if you loved me, you wouldn't say 'no'." But when you do say "no," state 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. Your child has a right to protest, but if there is a

mini-rebellion that affects all other household members, you may have to remove him from the situation to a "time-out" space so he can gain composure. Effective discipline includes your 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 get older, particularly as they enter junior high school, they will discuss, debate, argue and often hotly contest many decisions. As one father said, "It doesn't seem as easy as it used to be." As your child becomes a teenager, there is the development of verbal and reasoning skills that seem to block the easy "yes" and "no" answers you used to give to many requests. Children don't stay the same and neither do you. We are all caught up in the changing process.

Some of the rules established when your children were younger may 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. That way your child will learn more self-discipline. But your child will make mistakes and you must support and encourage your child, both during experimentation and mistakes, as well as when the child achieves according to your expectations.

Use the "over the shoulder" perspective--When you discipline your children, imagine that they are now adults and are observing what you are doing "over your shoulder." How would they react? What would they say to you? What would they urge you to do?

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 life a knife wound in my soul are two things: 1) that I behaved badly at times, and said and did some things I wish I hadn't; and 2) 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."

Summary

Our effectiveness as "life guides" for our children depends on our self-confidence, our willingness to learn and change, and a sincere valuing of our children and ourselves. Some disciplinary techniques are effective; some are not. 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.

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