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## CONSTRUCTIVE DISCIPLINE FOR LITTLE CHILDREN

by Ruth Staples

Control by adults is necessary for little children, in order to provide for their safety and well being. The little child has no more knowledge of the foods that are essential for building a strong body than he has of the dangers of the city street. But, just as we expect the child to eventually provide for his own needs, and to care for himself, so must we expect him to become independent in his conduct.

In the early years children must conform to their parents' wishes, they must learn that to do certain things doesn't pay. But gradually they must learn to control their own behavior, they must learn not to refrain from doing this or that because of fear of punishment, but because they really believe it is the right thing to do. Guiding principles and standards of conduct must be developed. Self-discipline and self-guidance by the child should be the goal toward which parents are working. Of course, it is much easier to simply tell the children what they must, or must not do, but it doesn't build for the future.

Constructive discipline begins in babyhood. The baby who is brought up with a regular schedule of feeding and sleeping is learning his first lessons in obedience. He finds that it doesn't pay to scream and kick. He must conform to his mother's wishes, just as later he must conform to law and order. Much of this training in regularity will carry over, past babyhood, into childhood. It is much easier to teach a little child to come in when you call him, or to put his toys away, if, during babyhood he has had to abide by regular hours. If he was fed whenever he cried, it will be harder for him to learn, later on, that crying will not get him his own way.

How to Teach Children to be ObedientSecure the Child's Attention.

With little children and with older children, too, success in securing obedience rests largely on the method of giving commands. The first step is to secure the child's attention. When you are sure he is listening to you, tell him what you wish him to do.

Don't ask too Much.

Commands should be few in number. If a child is constantly ordered about, and told to do this or stop doing that forty times a day, he gets rebellious and obstinate. Moreover, he soon stops paying attention to whoever handles him in this way, because he must have some freedom. Ask only what is really necessary of the children. Do away with constant nagging and supervision. Save your commands for the things that really matter.

Be Reasonable in Dealing with Children.

What you ask of the children should always be reasonable. A child should be allowed as much freedom as his stage of development warrants. Being over-



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solicitous of his welfare, being afraid to let him do this and that, forbidding him to do what the rest of the children of his age do with apparent safety is most unreasonable, and leads to failure in later social adjustment. It is a serious thing to make a child feel different, in any way, from his little companions.

It is wise, also, to explain the reasons for our requests and restrictions. Some people fear that reasoning with a child will make him argue. But treating him like an intelligent human being isn't going to do this. The child who learns to argue is the one who is accustomed to changing his parents decision by his arguing. He has found that an argument pays, it frequently brings about a reversal of the command.

#### Be Consistent in What you Ask

Being consistent is another basic factor in good discipline. If a parent is strict one day and lenient the next, the child will never know what is really expected of him and will try to do about what he pleases. He will not learn to hang up his wraps if one day you make him do it, and the next day do it yourself. Both parents should get together and come to an agreement as to what they are going to demand of the children. If they dispute before them, about matters of discipline, if they differ in what they permit the children to do, the youngsters soon take advantage of the situation and go from one parent to the other, according to their leniency. Such sort of treatment is not constructive. It is not a help in building character. It does not form standards of conduct, that will guide the child in the future, but teaches him to get around the law, if there is a way out.

#### See that Commands you Give are Carried Out.

This is the most important factor in securing obedience. Telling the child to do a certain thing and not insisting that he does it, soon shows him that you do not really mean what you say. It is not necessary to raise the voice, and shout your command louder and louder. Firmness and calmness are the attitudes the parents should assume, and they are attitudes the child soon learns to respect.

The rules to be observed in teaching children habits of obedience may be summed up as follows:

1. Secure the child's attention.
2. Get his interest and cooperation. Don't fight with him as if you were another child, but make him willing to obey.
3. Make the commands reasonable, and few in number.
4. Be consistent.
5. Remember that the child's personality should be respected.
6. Build for the future, by teaching your child to discipline himself.

But how, you may ask, does one build for the future? How teach obedience to principles, instead of to persons? The answer is this:- By giving the child opportunity to make conscious choices, by letting him have practice in making decisions for himself. Talk things over with him, explaining carefully and with sympathy, just why his conduct was undesirable, and how some other form of behavior would have been better. All this takes time, and is not learned in a week or a year, but, if the training is begun early, and kept up throughout childhood, we have the young man or woman who has principles to guide himself by, when he leaves home and must rely upon his own judgement.



### Punishment

The purpose of punishment is to attach an unpleasant effect to the form of behavior we do not wish to be repeated. A certain amount of punishment is unavoidable, especially with very young children. To be effective, it must be prompt, and to avoid developing resentment and sullenness, it must not be too prolonged. It must be well suited to the offense, and within the understanding of the child, and it must differ, with individual children. What, to one, is almost nothing, might be taken very seriously by another.

If possible, the punishment, should be the natural consequence of the misdeed. One little boy who, in a fit of anger, stamped his brother's crayons into the living room rug, had to clean it up, and spend his saved up pennies for some new ones. This was a much more effective punishment than a spanking, and incidentally he learned something about property rights.

Isolation is a very effective punishment for most children. They love to be with others, but they must learn that if they are unkind and selfish, no one will want them around. Depriving them of some pleasure, provided it is in keeping with the magnitude of the offense, is another method of discipline. Most people who have made a study of the behavior of children, believe that spanking has little place, as a form of punishment. Parents usually administer spankings because it is the easiest punishment to think of and it is a way of giving vent to their own feelings. Other means of control are usually more effective in the long run, as well as being a greater help to the child, in guiding his future conduct. If the five-year-old dallies with his dressing and consequently misses going down town with his father, he learns that he misses a lot if he is late and inconsiderate of others. The next time, he will want to dress quickly.

If we are not careful, certain types of punishment will have very unfortunate results on the personality of the child. Children who are very severely punished may become afraid not only of the ones who discipline them, but of taking any initiative. They do not dare go ahead, for fear it may not be met with approval. They lose confidence in their ability to do anything the right way. Some children resort to lying, as a means of escape from severe punishment. If children fail to understand just why they have to be scolded or punished, or if the punishment to them seems harsh and unjust, they often become sullen and resentful. The parent who gives well thought out commands will seldom need to resort to punishment. To punish, it will be remembered, means to make undesirable behavior unsatisfactory to the child. While this type of discipline has its place, to make desirable behavior satisfactory is a more constructive method. This is especially true if discipline is thought of, not as making the child do what his elders want him to do, just because they say so - or "to teach him who is the boss," but to teach him how to discipline himself in such a way that he will grow up to be a desirable member of a family, and a good citizen.