

# The Discipline Solution

by *Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D.*

Discipline has long been the bane of parenting—the thorn in the side of an otherwise mostly delightful career opportunity. How to do it, how much to do it, when to do it, and what to do when it doesn't work are questions that baffle parents and even have some parent educators scratching their heads. To get some answers, let's take a look at what most parents hope to achieve through discipline and how they try to achieve it.

The main goal of discipline is to teach your child to behave within reasonable limits as defined by the parent, by another in-charge caregiver, by society, or by the basic needs of the situation. Parents who avoid this often unpleasant task and adopt a permissive style of parenting often end up as “doormats,” allowing their children to walk all over them on their way to becoming spoiled or developing increasingly severe behavior problems. At the other end of the parenting spectrum are the “dictators”: parents who crack down on their children with a combination of reward and severe punishment, and whose kids often wind up either rebelling or suffering from diminished self-esteem. Between these parenting extremes are “Active” parents who, rather than allowing their kids too much or too little freedom, instead use an authoritative style of parenting that incorporates a variety of respectful discipline strategies, not only teaching children independence within reasonable limits, but also instilling such character traits as responsibility, cooperation, and courage.

This gets us to the bigger goal of parenting: to prepare your child to survive and thrive in the kind of society in which he or she will live. For us in the United States, that means a high-tech, multi-cultural, democratic society. The parenting methods that will work in this context are significantly different from those that will work in other cultures or the methods that worked at other times in history. Effective discipline must fit the overall context of the society in which it is meant to work. So, the following suggestions promote discipline based on the democratic values of mutual respect, equality, and personal responsibility.

## Practical Parenting Suggestions

- 1. Invite your child to participate in deciding where the limits are.** Whether you're establishing a curfew, a study time, or when it's okay to get in a fight, don't just dictate your values and desires to your kids. Get them involved in the process of setting limits, and you'll have an easier time enforcing those limits later.
- 2. But only accept limits that you can live with.** Suggestion #1 does not mean to accept from your kids suggestions that go against your family's values or the rules of society. Sometimes you can reach a compromise with a child. Other times, it's necessary to take a stand and enforce unpopular limits. After all, democracy doesn't mean you always get your way; it means you always get your say.

- 3. Use logical consequences rather than punishment.** When your child repeatedly violates a rule or limit that you have established, don't rely on punishments to hurt the child into improving bad behavior. Instead, use a logically connected consequence to do the teaching. For example, when Dennis crayons on the living room wall, his Mom doesn't send him to the corner to think about what he has done (an arbitrary punishment); rather, she gives him the task of washing the crayoning off the walls (a logical consequence).
- 4. Give more choices and fewer orders.** Parents can avoid or solve many discipline problems by giving the child a choice instead of an order. Instead of trying to get your child to put on a shirt that he doesn't want to wear, give him a choice between two shirts. The power to choose is often all it takes to solve a problem.
- 5. Use "when-then" sequencing to motivate behavior.** When your child is avoiding a task that she doesn't want to do, find something else that she does want to do and sequence them as a pair, requiring that she complete the unpopular task before she can do the task she enjoys. For example, "When you have taken your bath, then you may listen to your music." This is not a reward, which can lead to a "what's in it for me" attitude; rather, it's a purposeful ordering of two events that occur regularly anyway.
- 6. Acknowledge your child's feelings.** When you're enforcing limits, it's not necessary to take on an adversarial position with your child. Instead, try acknowledging how your child thinks and feels about the situation. This doesn't mean giving in; it simply means showing some empathy for his desires. For example: "You're really disappointed that going to the wedding with us means missing the game. I can understand that."
- 7. Help your child learn to find acceptable alternatives.** Teach your child to problem solve within the limits of a situation. This important skill is a grand gift that she will carry with her all through life, plus it will help prevent conflicts and power struggles. For example: "I know it's disappointing to miss the game, but I wonder if you could meet up with your friends afterwards, or even invite a couple of them over to spend the night."
- 8. Don't fight and don't give in.** Stay calm and firm when disciplining. If you get hooked into a fight with your child, you set up a vicious cycle that leads to frustration and anger now and in the future. If you cave in to unreasonable demands by being too wishy-washy, you invite more misbehavior and will have a hard time in the future getting your child to take you seriously.
- 9. Work on your overall relationship with your child.** Discipline doesn't occur in a vacuum; it always occurs within the overall context of your relationship. Build a positive relationship with your child by having fun together, responding to feelings, teaching her skills, and other ways, and you will find that discipline is much easier to enforce.

**10. Get help when you need it.** Learning to discipline your children effectively is both an important and difficult challenge, so don't be too proud to ask for help. Work with your partner, if you're in a relationship, to support each other and offer a consistent message to your child. If you're single, sometimes it's helpful and necessary to reach out to a relative, a friend, a youth leader, or even the police. Take a good parenting course. Work with your kids' school. And, if need be, use the mental health services available in your community. Your child's future depends on learning to live with the rules and limits of society, and that begins at home. ■

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***About Michael Popkin***

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at [www.ActiveParenting.com](http://www.ActiveParenting.com).

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