

Discipline: What Is It?

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For many people, the word “discipline” suggests a harsh or unpleasant action. It is often thought to mean punishment. As parents, if we see ourselves as those who teach and guide our children rather than as those who punish, we will search for techniques that resolve conflicts without loss of dignity for the child or for us. We will improve our ability to correct our children lovingly. It is vital to remember that if we have a warm and loving relationship with our children and if we communicate well with them most of the time, that is what is most important. We all make mistakes. So if you goof up, don’t give up. But try again. Don’t be afraid to say to your child, “I’m trying to work out some better ways to be a parent. What I did (yelling, spanking, whatever) was not what I want to do. I’m sorry, and I’m going to try again.”

The following principles are offered to help guide you.

The Seven Principles of Discipline

1

Tell children what they can do instead of what they can’t do, or focus on the do’s instead of the don’ts. If our language is overloaded with negative words (no, don’t, stop it, quit that, cut it out, shut up) our children may decide to tune us out. If we limit use of negative words to situations of great importance, they are more likely to hear and respect them when they are used.

Tip for Parents

Put a sheet of paper on top of your refrigerator or on the bulletin board. Every time you use a negative word put a check mark on your paper. At the end of twenty-four hours, how many check marks do you have? Can you improve your score by minus 10 by the following day?



2

Protect and preserve children's feelings that they are lovable and capable. Children need to give and receive love. They must also be able to learn how to function well in the world. We help them by respecting them and letting them know we think they are capable.

Tip for Parents

Make an "I Am Lovable and Capable" sign for your child. If your child is too young to understand it, put it where only you can see it. Every time you or anyone else says or does something that hurts your child, tear a little piece off the sign. How lovable and capable does your child feel at the end of the day? Try this a second day and listen to yourself.



3

Offer children choices only when you are willing to abide by their decisions. Children usually take us seriously when we offer them a choice. Often a difficult situation occurs because we offer choices we don't really mean.

Tip for Parents

Listen to yourself carefully for a week. Count the number of inappropriate choices you offer your child in the course of a day. On the next day, try to catch yourself before you offer an unfair choice. At this point, you may be feeling discouraged and unnatural. But remember you feel self-conscious anytime you learn a new skill. Learning to be an effective parent takes skill. After a while new parenting skills come naturally and without self-consciousness. In the beginning, however, it's really hard.



4

Change the environment instead of the child's behavior. Sometimes parent/child conflicts happen because some part of the physical surrounding is too old for young children (example: breakable objects on a coffee table) or because we expect more grown-up behavior or choices than the child can handle.

Tip for Parents

Look for places in your home that need a change for your comfort or your child's comfort. Is it placing a box next to the sink so your child can wash and get a drink without help? Is it clearing out a low kitchen cupboard and stocking it with pots and pans that your baby can play with while you cook? Is it asking an appliance store for a big cardboard box so that your children have something that's O.K. to climb on and you don't have to yell at them for climbing on the furniture? Write down the steps you took and review them from time to time to see the progress you're making.



5

Work with children instead of against them. Taking a moment to stand back and watch children and then figuring a way for them to do what they are trying to do can turn a battle into a pleasant (or at least tolerable) time for you both.

Tip for Parents

Give yourself ten points every time you adjust a plan to fit the needs of your child. Sometimes parents get mad when they plan to do something nice and their children choose not to follow the plan. It's sometimes easier and more pleasant to change the plan than change the child! Of course, some plans can't be changed, such as a trip to the doctor or leaving for work on time. When you are dealing with a child's objections to a plan that can't be changed, it is necessary to be pleasant, calm, and extremely firm. Parents who are wishy-washy or who agree to every childish whim do not provide good examples of responsible adult behavior. With very young children who resist a parent's request, it may be easier on both parents and child if the adult picks up and carries a resisting child rather than pleading, cajoling, or threatening.



6

Give children safe limits they can understand. Recognize their feelings without accepting their actions. Maintain your authority calmly and consistently. When children break rules, allow them to experience the gentle consequences of their behavior. Children see the world differently from adults. Behavior and safety rules must be stated clearly and simply to children. It's not fair to scold for breaking rules they did not understand.

Tip for Parents

Stating why a particular rule exists helps a child develop a broader knowledge of safety and good behavior. Review, at nonemergency times, steps to those actions you want a child to take. This will help him/her learn what actions are safe and acceptable and why they are so.



7

Set a good example. Speak and act only in the ways you want children to speak and act. The importance of parents as models for children cannot be stressed strongly enough.

Tip for Parents

Avoid those "don't do as I do, do as I say" situations such as spanking a child to teach him/her not to hit other children. Instead, try to use the firm, gentle, and kind discipline tips given in this leaflet. Remember, it's easy to force children to obey. It's harder, but more rewarding, to bring up children who want to follow your examples of appropriate behavior because they love, respect, and want to be like you.



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