



On Discipline

Other than love, self discipline is the greatest gift a parent or teacher can give a child. The person who teaches self discipline to a child is usually the mother or father but it may also be relatives, babysitters, teachers, coaches, older siblings or other persons who have periods of responsibility for a growing child. For the purposes of this chapter the person providing discipline will be called the parent.

A mother in treatment had a four-year-old child who had attention deficit disorder. She would ask him to do something and it would go in one ear and out the other, and, of course, not be done. One evening she was cooking dinner and had made brownies. While still warm, she placed the brownies on top of the refrigerator waiting for dessert that evening. She said to Johnny, "Do not eat the brownies! They are for dessert," and then left the kitchen for a few minutes. She came back less than five minutes later discovering Johnny on top of the refrigerator eating brownies! Previously this and similar episodes had frequently sent the mother into a rage.

After discussing these situations with the mother in treatment she was able to contain herself and have Johnny take a four-minute (1 minute per year) time-out during which both Johnny and mother calmed down. She then sat down with Johnny and asked what he thought he had done wrong. Johnny accurately reported he had eaten some brownies that were for dessert and he was not supposed to eat them now. Mother agreed with this and ask him to repeat again what it was he did wrong. Johnny accurately repeated again what he did wrong. At this point the mother asked Johnny what the consequence should be. Johnny responded seriously, "I should be killed!" This astonished his mother who had previously believed Johnny never felt bad in any way about any of his behaviors. Mother told Johnny killing him for eating brownies would be wrong and suggested instead he not get more brownies after dinner, he not watch any television and he go to bed a little bit earlier that night than usual. They also agreed if Johnny was more able to do things he was asked to do the next day then he could have some brownies after dinner tomorrow night. Johnny agreed to this and was more cooperative than usual the rest of the evening and did get some brownies the next evening. The mother described this with amazement. She was more able to see Johnny wanted to do what he was told but was having trouble controlling himself. When she yelled and screamed at him it served to distract him from controlling his behavior and it made him worse. Upsetting him made it more difficult for

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him to pay attention to what he was supposed to be doing. Calmly talking with him, one on one, helped Johnny to begin to internalize some better control over his otherwise unpredictable behavior and maintain it for at least a day. She also said she felt much better about Johnny and he seemed more relaxed with her.

Discipline and punishment are different issues. Discipline is rooted in love. Punishment is rooted in fear. Punishment says, “Do what I say or I will hurt you!” Punishment uses fear in an attempt to control other people. Discipline says, “Do what you need to do because it is good for you!”

Numerous experiments have demonstrated fear of punishment is a much less effective means to mold behavior than is reward. Reward motivates all animals vastly more effectively than fear. Fear motivates an animal as long as the feared situation is at hand. When the source of fear is absent, the behavior the fear is meant to modify is no longer modified or controlled. Thus it is not surprising when children who were raised to fear their parents frequently lose control of their behavior when they move beyond the control of their parents. Children who learned self discipline as a part of loving themselves are able to maintain control over otherwise potentially destructive impulses when the parents are absent.

The goal of discipline is for the child to learn the “language of discipline.” Rather than a verbal language, “the language of discipline” is a set of mostly automatic emotional reactions children learn from being parented. We use words to communicate to ourselves and to satisfy needs. Once words are learned, most words come automatically when we need them. The goal of discipline is for the “language of discipline” to come automatically to us when we need to adjust our behavior for our needs to be met.

Unfortunately many of us experienced punishment from angry parents rather than discipline from caring parents. None of us readily internalize what we learn from people whom we fear. All of us want to sustain relationships with people who love us. We easily and readily internalize loving discipline. This becomes self discipline.

Self discipline is the ability to make ourselves do what is best for us and best for those whom we love in the long term despite short term discomforts. It is the ability to say to our self, “I am going to do what is right even though it is difficult because it is the loving thing to do. Doing this will benefit me and everyone I know, or will know, even though right now I don’t feel like doing it.”

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There are three steps to effective disciplining.

1. **Calm the situation down.**
 - o **time-out for the child and when necessary the parent too.**
2. **Determine what the problem behavior is.**
 - o **first the child states their idea of what the problem is**
 - o **then the parent clarifies or corrects and**
3. **Establish consequences and follow up.**
 - o **first the child suggests consequences**
 - o **then the parent modifies or changes the consequences**
 - o **and, finally, both agree on a way to assess how the change is going.**

Calm the Situation Down

The first rule for disciplining and the one most parents object to when it is first mentioned to them is *a parent must not discipline a child when the parent is angry*. Many parents say if they did not discipline the child when they were angry then they would never discipline them at all. When it is pointed out to the parent what they do and what they say when they are angry, most parents quickly agree what they are doing or saying they really do not mean and rarely follow up on. Disciplining when you are angry never works. A corollary to the first rule is *the child also has the right to tell the parent the parent is too angry to discipline them*. To some parents this seems unreasonable at first; however, once a parent begins to follow this rule, it saves the parent from saying very stupid things.

As an example, a parent when angry will frequently say something such as, “You may not watch television for a month.” All of us know the likelihood of that being achieved is extremely low. It is now Saturday night, Mom and Dad want to watch a movie they rented they do not want the children to watch. Mom and Dad also know if the children have a movie to watch themselves they are likely to play peacefully while Mom and Dad enjoy their movie. Yet just last week Mom or Dad told the children no TV for a month. Thus the well-meaning consequence is busted. A synonym for angry is mad. A synonym for mad is crazy. All of us know when we are angry we are also crazy. When we are crazy we are in no state of mind to be disciplining anyone other than ourselves.

The next rule for disciplining saves us from the first rule. This rule is *the parent may send the child to their room or a designated place for time-out or send the child out of the room the parent is in at any time for any reason*. Homes are not democracies. For a time-out a child needs to go to their time-out place or to their room for one minute for each year of the child’s age. A child of six takes a 6 minute time-out. A parent of 46 takes a 46 minute time-out. If a child under 10 refuses to take a time-out the parent may need to take the child into a room for the time-out. When this occurs the essay On Soothing is helpful to know. If a larger child or teenager refuses to take a time-out which invariably

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enrages the parent, the parent must first calm down often by taking a time-out him or herself. If removing privileges the parent can control such as access to televisions, the computer or telephones does not resolve the resistance the parent will need to file charges against the child in juvenile court for being incorrigible. The parent will then have expert assistance in controlling the child.

As said above “***the parent may send the child to their room or a designated place for time-out or send the child out of the room the parent is in at any time for any reason.***” For children younger than about 8 having them take a time out randomly helps them to learn to manage their feelings more successfully. Little children love the games Mother May I and Simon Says because they are trying to learn when they need to do what they are told and when they don't. Parents are often quite confusing. Taking a time out with younger children often helps them to learn how to calm down and manage their feelings on their own. Young children still need parents to help them calm down when they are overwhelmed.

These first two rules successfully achieve the first step of effective discipline. They calm down the situation and establish control over it.

Determine the Problem Behavior

Once the ***first*** step of control is established, ***the parent then sits down with the child and asks the child what the reason is for the time out or discipline.*** The reason the child is asked first, rather than being told, is the goal of discipline is to get the child to be thinking about what they did and what might be wrong with it. The goal of discipline is not for the parent continually to have to discipline but rather for the child to learn to control his or her own behavior. To accomplish this we need to have the child thinking about what the child did that may or could have been a problem. Often you will discover the child has all sorts of strange and interesting ideas about what they did wrong. Once a child has expressed his or her ideas ***the parent can then agree or correct in whatever way necessary.*** This could be saying something completely different from what the child said or to make minor changes or to agree with what the child said. ***Once there seems to be agreement over what the problem behavior is, the parent then asks the child to repeat one more time what the problem behavior is*** so both are very clear about it.

Establish Consequences

The third and final step of discipline is to ***establish consequences and follow up*** on the consequences of the undesired behavior. Once the problem behavior is agreed upon, the parent then ***asks the child what consequences would be appropriate*** for the behavior. In most children under the age of 13 the consequences the child comes up with will be much more harsh and severe than what most parents would choose. This again achieves the task of getting the child to think about consequences for behavior. Also this often takes the

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parent out of the role of being the bad guy since the parent usually modifies, in a more reasonable direction, the final consequence of discipline. Most children end up feeling helped and supported by the parent and thus are much more likely to carry out the plan of action as well as internalize the process. Once the consequences are agreed upon both the parent and the child become responsible for following up on the consequences. This can be simply saying to each other the following day the day has gone without the problem behavior or can be much more complex depending on the agreement between the parent and child.

A part of the art of disciplining *for parents is not to wait until something is done wrong* for them to intervene. Most parents know when a child is beginning to get out of control. Indeed Johnny's mother may have avoided the entire episode if she had told Johnny to come with her when she left the kitchen or even had put him in a 4 minute time-out until she returned – assuming he had already learned how to take a time-out which he hadn't. This is the reason to establish the rule the parent can tell a child they have to take a time-out at any time for no clear reason. Indeed this is one of the psychological reasons behind the childhood games "Mother May I" and "Simon Says". The child is learning when they do and when they do not need to do what Mother says. It is also a wish of all children for parents to be clear about what the rules are! With 2 to 4 year olds it is a good idea to play a time-out game a few times. The parent randomly tells the child to take a time-out where they can still see the parent such as on a chair. When I was raising my five children we had a graduated time-out place. The first place was on the first step of the stairs that went upstairs where they could still see a parent. The second place was out of visual sight of a parent such as in the next room or at the top of the stairs. The last place was in his or her room. If after a seemingly random time-out the child wishes to discuss why he or she needed to take a time-out the parent needs to be willing to discuss the thoughts and feelings motivating the parent to tell the child to take a time-out. The parent may have felt the child was getting a little too impulsive or irritable or simply needed to calm down a little. What most parents quickly discover is children know they needed a time-out and do not bother later to ask the parent why.

In a similar manner, when parents ask a child to do something, often the child will say, "Why?" The naïve parent will begin to explain to the child why. This is usually falling into the trap the child has set to avoid doing what the parent has asked them to do. First the parent needs to tell the child to do what the parent is asking and then, if the child still wants to know why, the parent agrees to sit down and discuss it with the child. The parent will discover the child almost never returns to ask why they had to do what they were requested because the child clearly knows, knew all along or came up with a reasonable explanation themselves while they were doing it.

Disciplining in this manner results in the child's internalization of the ability to discipline herself or himself in a reasonable manner. It helps to lighten the task of taming the internal critic present in all of us regardless of our upbringing. Harsh punishment routinely enhances the strength of the internal critic and undermines healthy self-esteem in adults.

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We are all lovable. It is our duty and privilege to learn how to love ourselves along with the people around us. Love is not a commodity to be earned or traded. It must be freely given, accepted and acknowledged. In order for this to happen we all need to have the capacity to discipline ourselves and to discipline the people around us lovingly. The most valuable friend, spouse or teacher in life is the one who can disagree with us directly in a loving manner that helps us to identify, control and change behaviors that otherwise may undermine our loving relationship with ourselves as well as with the world around us.

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