

DISCIPLINE WITH LOVE

By Leonard Szymczak, MSW, LCSW

The phrase, “Spare the rod and spoil the child” referred to a time when corporal punishment, or spanking, was seen as the only way to discipline children. However, considerable studies have shown that such techniques are not only ineffective but they teach children that violence is an acceptable method to resolve conflict. Children who were spanked often faced a higher risk of developing aggressive behavior, low self-esteem, alcoholism, and depression.

As parents we often adopted the model of parenting that was handed down by our own parents. “When my father (or mother) spanked me, I learned respect,” is an often used remark to justify corporal punishment. However, with our increased knowledge and understanding of children, we have developed more effective methods of parenting.

It’s important to note that the very word, ‘discipline’, comes from the word, disciple – one who follows out of love. Obviously, your goal as a parent is to have your children become a disciple and follow the values and beliefs you hold dear. You are their role model and set the standards of behavior in the household. In the process you teach your children about setting limits, controlling behavior, and resolving conflict.

So when faced with a host of problems with your children such as helping out with chores, completing schoolwork, behaving appropriately, or cleaning the bedroom, here are some guidelines which can be modified depending on the age of your children.

- **STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS.** The greatest form of respect emanates from love not fear. Children, more often than not, want to please parents who love them. Personal time giving loving attention to a child during meals, bedtime stories, or fun activities strengthens the emotional bond. A close relationship with your child makes it far easier to talk about and resolve problems when they do arise.
- **ESTABLISH LIMITS.** Be clear about limits. Clarify the negative behaviors you want to eliminate such as temper tantrums and list the positive behaviors you want to reinforce like doing chores and being respectful. Know what is negotiable and non-negotiable. Bedtime may be non-negotiable during a school day but may be negotiable on the weekend.
- **REMAIN CALM AND BE CONCISE.** Parents often become far too emotional and over explain themselves. Remaining calm and concise helps to not only defuse conflictual situations but also conveys to your child that you are in control. You can then focus on your management goals, namely, to reinforce good behavior with positives and eliminate bad behavior through consequences.
- **MOTIVATE WITH CHARTS.** In essence, a chart provides a visual aid for children to record when they have completed tasks. A typical chore chart will be divided into

the days of the week, which are listed at top and the chores, which are identified down the side. Depending on the age of the child, stars or checkmarks will indicate when chores have been successfully completed. If the chart is placed on the refrigerator, it becomes a public display of achievement. Some children readily respond to parental recognition and praise when they receive stickers. Others need to work for privileges, which are earned when an agreed number of checks have been completed.

- **ESTABLISH CONSEQUENCES.** Time-outs serve as a simple method to eliminate negative behavior. Simply put, when a child misbehaves, he or she is given a time-out and told to go to another room. If at home, the bedroom may be the best place to serve the time-out. Some parents use a counting system from one to three so that the child has two warnings before serving a time-out. Time-outs usually range from 5 to 10 minutes but can be longer with older children. Examples of other consequences for misbehavior include losing television, phone or internet privileges, working extra chores, or grounding. Be sure the consequence fits the infraction.
- **REINFORCE GOOD BEHAVIORS WITH PRAISE.** Children love to hear positive feedback. Phrases like, “Thanks for helping out,” or “Great job on your homework,” go a long way toward reinforcing positive behaviors. If you want to motivate your child to complete a task, try the Oreo technique. Sandwich two positives around a negative. “I really appreciate you’re helping me out. Could you pick up your things in the living room? Thanks.”
- **INTRODUCE CHOICES.** Involving children in decision-making can reduce problems with control. Choices can be offered that fulfill a similar objective. Some examples: “Do you want to take a shower or a bath?” “Do you want to wash or dry the dishes?” “Do you want to do your homework before or after dinner?” Choices offer children the experience of making decisions and exercising control over their lives.
- **BE CONSISTENT.** Stability and consistency are important qualities in a child’s life. Therefore, be prepared to follow through with your parent management program. Continually reinforce good behaviors and follow through with the consequences you’ve established. As it takes many years for a child to mature, so does it take years of loving guidance to promote responsible children.
- **UPGRADE PARENTING SKILLS.** Most jobs require you to upgrade skills. There’s no job more important than parenting. Attend parenting courses offered in the community. An excellent resource is Dr. Thomas Phelan’s book or videotape, *1-2-3: Magic! Training Your Preschoolers and Preteens to Do What You Want*.

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