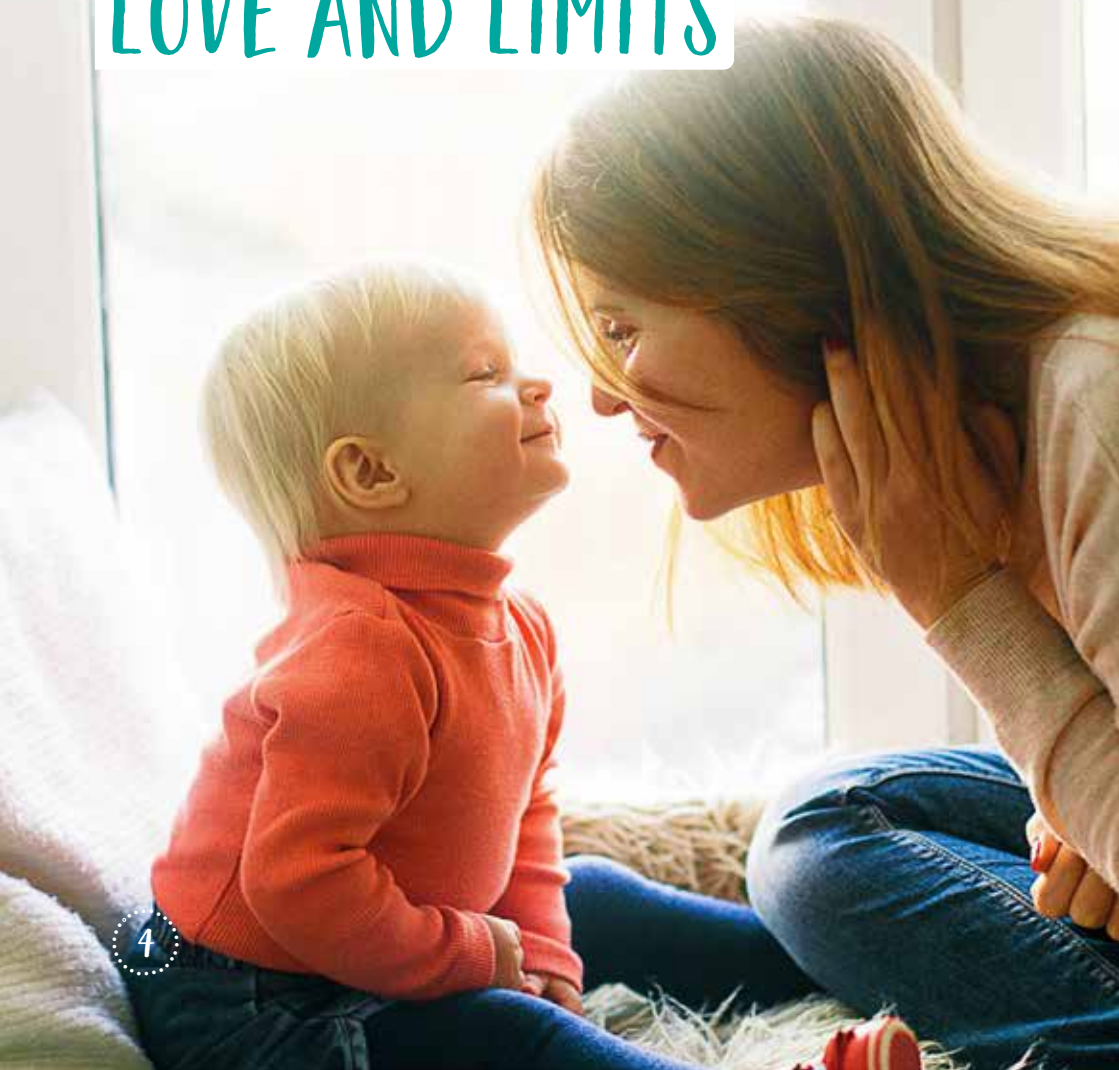


Parenting

DISCIPLINE:
LOVE AND LIMITS



The toddling terminator has been trashing your lounge room as his parents sit there, allowing him to “be an individual”. “Just a phase,” says his mother airily as she gives in to another tantrum.

Your children watch, horrified. “Perfectly natural,” trills his father. “No doubt he’ll grow into a terrorist,” you say, but only to yourself.



Your three-year-old daughter sits beside you in a restaurant, eating nicely and chatting. “Daddy, could I have some more juice, please?” You hear a murmur of approval pass around the restaurant. A dozen people look ready to adopt such a charming and courteous child. You feel like Father of the Year.

What’s the difference between nightmare and dream? Children have different personalities, activity levels, genes, etc. But the major difference is discipline.

Discipline: not a dirty word

Many people hear the word *discipline* and think of an angry father thrashing a child with his belt or a mum screaming put-downs at a toddler in a supermarket. They think discipline equals punishment. But discipline really just means training—punishment is only a last resort.

Good discipline actually helps a child develop to their full potential because you love them. What’s negative about that? And what’s positive about letting children be whining, tantrum-throwing bad sports, dependent fusspots, bullies or unthinking “red cordial children” with the attention span of a gnat? How is that helping them to enjoy happy, successful lives and be the great people they could be? And what does it inflict on the civilised world?

Don’t think that discipline demands you must be harsh, verbally attacking or physically violent. It includes punishment at times, but ideally it is mainly positive. Its aim is to give your child control over themselves so that they can achieve in all areas of life.

.....

“GOOD DISCIPLINE
ACTUALLY HELPS A CHILD
DEVELOP TO THEIR FULL
POTENTIAL BECAUSE YOU
LOVE THEM.”

.....



Discipline is ineffective and even damaging if the child's "love tank" is empty. There's a great scene in the movie *The Lion King*, where Simba has just disobeyed his father and gone into dangerous territory, nearly losing his and his girlfriend's life. His father rescues him with awesome strength and, seeing Simba is grateful and very sorry for his disobedience, he walks home talking quietly with him, stopping on the way for a play wrestle. This wrestle is a fun way to show physical affection to his son, and tells him without words that he is loved and valuable. It also demonstrates the father's power, subtly saying that this power will be used against bad behaviour if necessary. The father never hurts him and this strong self-control models what he wants for his son. That's great discipline.

The aims of discipline

Great parenting brings out the best from the child, developing them to their full potential. This involves developing choices, skills and attitudes like these:

- My feelings matter and deserve to be respected, but I'm responsible for them.
- Other people have feelings and I need to treat them as I would like to be treated.
- I know what I want, but I won't always expect to get it.
- The world doesn't revolve around me.
- I am strong and secure enough to wait sometimes.
- I think before I act. I understand consequences, and respect laws and authority while thinking for myself.

What discipline includes

Discipline involves a much wider range of activities than you might first think:

1. MEETING NEEDS

Some bad behaviour is a result of unmet needs. If a child is hungry, tired, out of routine, bored or overstimulated, misbehaviour is predictable. You can't avoid some situations, but as a rule you can save yourself a lot of discipline headaches by anticipating what children need. Are they going on a long car trip? Pack drinks, toys and favourite music. Allow a quiet time when they normally sleep, and breaks so they can get some exercise and pump some endorphins.

Many children also act up because they feel insecure and even unloved. The "adolescent brat" who needles his brother may be a person who does not feel anyone really cares or understands. That may be why he can't "wipe that smirk off his face" when he is disciplined—he's enjoying the attention, because negative attention is better than none. (*See our Parenting course, "The Psychology of Love."*)

2. MODELLING AND TEACHING

Modelling doesn't mean strutting the catwalk. It means setting a good example in everyday life. And teaching is simply adding words to that. Parenthood is a scary moral wake-up call. One father (who lives a million miles from here) remembers speeding through an orange light that turned rather pinkish. A little voice piped up from the back, "Red mean stop." Ah, yes. Bluntly: If you swear, drive stupidly, cheat, lie, smoke, rebel against sensible rules or authorities, explode with anger or dope yourself on drugs, don't be surprised if they do too.

3. GOAL-SETTING, MOTIVATING

Most parents think of discipline as saying what a child cannot do. But encouragement is the best discipline. Telling a child they are well-behaved, intelligent, sporty, sociable and keeping a vision of success clear in their minds is a positive way to make it happen. Of course you should not make your love and appreciation conditional on them achieving in all areas. You should also make sure that the goals are compatible with their personality, talents and interests, so as to avoid frustration and disappointment all round.



.....

**“ENCOURAGEMENT IS
THE BEST DISCIPLINE.”**

.....



4. ADVICE AND REQUESTS

These are the basics of respectful leadership. OK, we all know you have the power and you could command the child to obey, but requesting is more positive.

- It respects their feelings
- It enlists their intelligence
- It calls them a good person who will do the sensible thing
- It teaches them to cooperate
- It models politeness

5. INSTRUCTIONS AND COMMANDS

These are for situations where there is one correct response. For example, if the dog has not been fed for a day, then it just has to be done, without any room for personal opinions. Commands are for emergencies (“Run!”), and for those times when requests and instructions are ignored, and a child is testing whether you really mean what you say. Commands will be even more effective if they are used sparingly. Some insecure parents overuse commands because they feel insecure in their role and do not expect their requests will be respected. Children soon see through this and learn to ignore a shouting parent.

6. GENTLE PHYSICAL CONTROL

Children are built small so that they can simply be removed from a situation, or put where they need to be.

Imagine:

“James, would you put that jar back on the shelf now, please”.
(Request.)
“Not yet.” (Request refused.)
“James, put it back right now.” (Command.)
No answer. (Command ignored.)

Some parents would smack immediately, but it may be wiser simply to pick him up, take the jar and put it back. (Gentle physical control.) As children grow up, physical removal gets more difficult—and hopefully less necessary.



7. PUNISHMENT

This is the last resort. Punishment needs to:

- **Be for the child's benefit**, not just to make you feel better. If you feel hurt or devalued and want the little brat to pay, then you should not punish. Say, "We'll talk about this later," and go and cool down till you think clearly. You'll be glad you did.
- **Be fair**. Justice demands everyone is innocent till proven guilty and must receive a fair hearing.
- **Fit the crime**. If a child sprays graffiti on a neighbour's wall, let them clean it off. If children are punished just as harshly for little things, they will figure they might as well do big things.
- **Fit the child**. Some children will love being sent to their room. Others will feel it is hell.
- **Be consistent**. Of course we are all human, and moods, tensions, sickness and marital conflict affect us all at times. But punishment should not vary wildly depending on how you feel. You may be wise to sit down and draw up a list of punishments when you are calm.

Here are some methods

1. STAND AND THINK

You put the child into a quiet corner and ask them to think. You ask them courteously and quietly: What did you do wrong? What should you have done? Can you do that now? If necessary, could you say sorry to [whoever]?

These questions get them thinking about their mistake without heavy confrontation. They also train them to expect these questions next time, and eventually to think them. Hopefully they say sorry without having to grovel.

2. CONSEQUENCES

Discipline aims at making the consequences of silly actions catch up with the child so that they learn to reason about cause and effect. You might add extra jobs (for example, "You can say sorry to your sister and pull out all the weeds in the back rose beds, please"), restrictions or withdrawal of privileges (for example, "Sorry, but your skateboard will be locked in my car boot for the next week").

3. TO SMACK OR NOT TO SMACK?

This is a controversial question and we're not going to lay down the law. One ex-Army heavyweight boxing champion said his father used to flog him with a rope, and his mother used to tell him quietly that he was a good boy and mustn't let himself down by bad behaviour. He said his mother had much more impact and he feared disappointing her much more than he feared his father's belting.

Then again, many men old enough to remember getting the cane at school will tell you (in moments of truth) that it "smartened them up". They would argue that the human bottom is well padded and seems naturally suited for the occasional smack from an open hand without any real harm. They claim that, as a last resort, a smack is a decisive final word and a good way to clear the air and bring closure so that everyone can move on.

If you decide to smack, only aim for bottoms—never swing at heads or faces. Little bodies are precious, so never use a fist or other hard object, or do anything else that borders on abuse. Don't smack in anger or for your own feelings, but genuinely for their benefit. When it's finished, it's finished—give them a hug and move on to something good. Some parents say they've smacked their children only two or three times in their lives, but knowing it was possible helped motivate them at stubborn times. And do it as a last resort—keep looking for other creative discipline methods.



Foolish discipline

There are definitely wrong ways to discipline children. If parts of this list start your red lights flashing, please don't see it as criticism but as a suggestion:

Making threats that don't happen. You need to follow through or they won't believe you next time.

Punishing in anger. This actually teaches a child how to lose control. And you might really hurt them. In extreme cases, this can lead to hospitalisation, to children being taken into other care and even to death (for example, shaking babies).

Ignoring worsening behaviour, then suddenly dropping a bomb on them. It's wiser to challenge them gradually before things get right out of hand.

Inconsistency. If children work out that they will get away with misbehaviour half the time, they may think it's worth the risk.

Extremes. When the child is very afraid or angry, they cannot think clearly.

Parents divided. Children will soon find and exploit any gaps between parents. They'll say, "But Mum said yes!"—and suddenly they're playing "divide and rule" games. But this actually makes children feel insecure—if Mum and Dad can't work things out, how will they? Even if two parents have different views, it's better to agree on a position. If you disagree with how your partner is handling the situation, tell them later (unless someone's about to be harmed).

Too many rules. Children can't carry a huge law code around in their heads. If God summarised morality in Ten Commandments, you shouldn't need many more family rules.

Rules without reasons. "Because I said so" is fine if you're trying to teach them to obey in emergencies, but you also want to teach them to think and reason.

Age-inappropriate rules. If they're too advanced, the child feels silly. Too babyish and the teenager feels disrespected.

Inappropriate body language. You may be feeling angry or sad for other reasons, but don't make your child feel they're to blame. Watch your tone and facial expression.

Bad timing. Don't discipline at mealtimes, unless it's an emergency.

Not moving on. Don't let punishment and anger stay hanging over everyone's heads like a nuclear missile threat. Change the mood to positive cooperation as soon as you can.

Rewarding bad behaviour. You've seen a child ask a parent to buy them a toy and then throw a wobbly when they won't. The poor guilty parent, desperately trying to be nice, gives in and buys the toy. And the child thinks, "Ah, that worked. Next time they say no, I'll tantrum again." Other rewards include more attention or pleasant distractions (a fun activity, food or drink).

"Wait till your father gets home." Old-fashioned thinking suggests one nurturing parent and one tough parent, usually the father. Yet ancient wisdom suggests a balanced role for fathers: "Fathers . . . bring them up with nurture and discipline"¹—the gentle and the tough. This models a complete, balanced personality.

Not listening.

Do as I say, not as I do.

.....

“PARENTS CAN SHOW
CHILDREN HOW TO GIVE
AND RECEIVE FORGIVENESS.”

.....



The last word

After a discipline situation, it's vital that you offer forgiveness and reconciliation. Of course the child needs to understand what they did wrong and be genuinely sorry. Pretending to be sorry or being sorry about getting caught, doesn't train them at all. But a child who is really sorry does not need further punishment. The matter should be over. They don't have to keep saying sorry or "paying" for their mistakes in subtle ways, but should receive open-hearted approval and affection. Forgiveness is the ability to lose guilty feelings and live above past mistakes—a very important life skill. Some people have suffered when religion is used to increase guilt, hoping this will motivate people. Yet God uses a very different strategy: Complete forgiveness, a command to "forget those things which are behind and go forward positively to your goal"².

Parents can show children how to give and receive forgiveness. If we make mistakes, we only win points when we apologise to our children.

Questions

- How were you disciplined as a child? What approaches worked on you? What does that say about your personality?
- What do you think will work on your children?

REFERENCES:

1. Ephesians 6:4, The Bible.
2. Philippians 3:13, The Bible.

Authors: Carla and Grenville Kent

Published by: HopeChannel

Printed by: Signs Publishing Compnay, Warburton, Victoria, Australia.