

Plain Talk

About child discipline



Whack!

“Johnny! I’ve told you a hundred times not to tease your little sister. Maybe now you’ll stop!”

Johnny stomped ahead of his mother and the stroller she was pushing. He caught up with his dad and said,

“That’s one thing I hate about people. They hit you.”

“Only when you do something wrong.”

Unless you are unusual, you’ve been part of a scene like this yourself. Of course, we all know what Johnny’s parents wanted to teach him: not to tease his sister, and to obey his parents.

Here’s what he learned instead:

- That he has reason to hate people: They’ll hurt him.
- That he should be especially on guard against getting hurt by the people closest to him, who love him.
- That it’s all right for “big people” to hurt “little people.”
- That if a “big” person hurts him, it’s a sure sign he has done something wrong.

It’s clear that Johnny’s parents didn’t teach him what they meant to teach. Instead, they may be breeding resentment, anger, guilt and violence in their son. If this is their normal way of dealing with him, he may become withdrawn, suspicious, and incapable of giving or receiving love. He could become the neighborhood bully or a juvenile delinquent. His tough exterior would only hide the hurt and shame he felt as a little boy. This story is sad and all too typical. Fortunately, there is a better way to discipline our children.

Why Discipline?

There are two reasons to discipline children. The first is obvious: We need to keep behavior within certain limits that we, as parents, set to prevent destructive or violent acts. You can’t allow a toddler to run into the street, a two-year-old to play with grandma’s vase, a five-year-old to kick during a tantrum, or a teenager to buy things the family can’t afford.

It’s important to set those limits wisely.

Otherwise we can find ourselves defending rules we really don’t believe in or not enforcing rules because even we know they are unreasonable. Then a child discovers that we don’t mean what we say and don’t need to be obeyed.

The second reason to discipline children has to do with a longer-term goal that is harder to accomplish. That goal is to teach our children to establish their own limits and rules that spring from the conscience and heart after we have faded from the picture. In other words, parents are responsible for teaching their children self-discipline.

Discipline that comes from within cultivates good feelings: inner order, calm, a sense of security and direction. It lets us arrange the parts of our lives into a harmonious lifestyle. It helps us balance our own needs, rights and desires with those of others. What a wonderful skill to teach a child!

With these two goals in mind - keeping behavior within limits and teaching self-discipline - let’s go back and look at Johnny’s parents again. Did they accomplish the first goal - getting Johnny to stop teasing his sister? Perhaps. But it’s likely they’ll only get temporary cooperation. He may not tease his sister while mom and dad are around, but what happens when they turn their backs may be another story.

And what about their long-range goals - teaching him to love his sister, to care about her feelings and safety and to respect her rights? Instead, the slap on his behind may have taught him resentment, hatred, fear and avoidance.

Disciplining a child often turns out to be a confusing and emotional experience.

That’s why it’s helpful to keep the two goals of discipline firmly in mind. They can help you tell the difference between your need to guide your child’s behavior, and your need to blow off steam.

Here are some suggestions to help you discipline your child effectively:

1. Recognize the temptation to use violence (a temptation every parent faces) as a sign that you are feeling weak and helpless toward your child. You are at your wit’s end and don’t know what to do. Back off, cool off, and try something else. Violence only hurts. Sometimes it does physical damage. And remember that each blow dealt a child destroys dignity, self-respect, confidence and courage. It contributes to a lifelong sense of brutality and hatred that the child will have to struggle with for the rest of his or her life.

2. Remember why a child behaves: to feel good. Children of all ages have good feelings when parents recognize and reward their good behavior. Children old enough to have developed a conscience - perhaps around age seven, eight or nine - will be "good" because they've learned that they like themselves better when they are. So you can complain to Johnny when he doesn't help or punish him or take away his privileges. But a pattern of praising him when he helps will be more effective in the long run.

3. Remember why a child misbehaves: to react to past or present hurts. A child with an emotional wound, like a child with a physical wound, becomes "swollen and inflamed" - with anger and fear. Use your awareness of that wound to help you be a compassionate and effective teacher when you discipline your child.

4. Encourage your child to talk about and express feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant. Don't deny or diminish them, as in: "Oh, Johnny, a big boy like you isn't afraid of the dark!" And let Susy know that it's all right if she tells you how angry she is, within reasonable limits. For example, she's not to use physical violence or insults. If you help your child discover acceptable ways to express anger, you can both look forward to loving feelings that will come when angry ones have been spent.

5. Show that you understand and respect the feelings behind your child's misbehavior. "I can see how angry you are, but I can't let you kick me." "I know you like that vase, but I can't let you play with it." "I know you want a new ski jacket, but I can't let you buy it when the old one still fits and we need other things more."

6. Set clear limits that you are prepared to enforce. Make certain your child understands the limits in advance. Feel free to change them, for example, when you think that Susy has the coordination and judgment to ride her bicycle in the street, or that Johnny has been given privileges he can't handle. Then stick by your decision.

7. Never withdraw love as a way to punish. Children need parents' love, just as they need food and shelter. Your love is the foundation of their emotional growth, their sense of security and self-worth. Let them know you love them all the time, even when you're angry. You can love them without loving their behavior.

8. Choose disciplinary methods that show your child that every action has consequences. Suppose Susy is always late for dinner. You can teach her the logical consequence of being late if you tell her she'll either have to go without din-

ner or make her own. When children understand how they can create "good" or "bad" consequences for themselves, they will be more responsible.

9. Never belittle your child, or use shame or guilt. Those negative techniques will only undermine your child's self worth - the cornerstone of all future positive behavior.

10. Don't expect perfection. Expect different behavior at the different stages of child development. At three months Susy may cry a lot. At two, she'll say "no" to everything. At eight, she'll be a copy of her best friend, and at fourteen, she may stay in her room for hours. Your doctor can suggest books to help you understand those stages better. Remember that unreasonable expectations cause children to feel they aren't good enough, which can lead to frustration, anger, or even abuse.

Help is not far away.

If you ever think you're in a situation you can't handle, get help. Talk to your spouse, a friend or a neighbor.

For parent education and support groups in your area, call your County Extension Family Living Agent or Prevent Child Abuse Wisconsin, 211 S. Paterson St., Ste. 250, Madison, WI 53703, (608) 256-3374 or 1-800-CHILDREN. www.preventchildabusewi.org

You can call a parent helpline for assistance:

Milwaukee: (414) 671-0566
Madison: (608) 241-2221

If you want professional counseling, call a local social agency or county social services/human services department. If the agency you call doesn't offer the kind of service you want, ask to be referred somewhere else.

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