

THOUGHTS ON DISCIPLINE AND PRAISE

by Helene van Niekerk

We all know that children need discipline. Unruly children are difficult to manage and won't get many invites to friends' houses. In a perfect world it would not be necessary to discipline them as they would act appropriately and listen to what they are being told. But is it not our main task as parents to teach our children to know the difference between right and wrong and appropriate and inappropriate behaviour?

The question is: how do we teach them rules for social interaction? How can we manage to influence their behaviour in order for them to grow into responsible, well adjusted and (hopefully) happy adults? Do we use the methods that our parents used for us or are there more modern ways of keeping our children in line? And what does our child learn from our disciplining methods?

Let us discuss a few disciplining methods.

Naughty chair or 'time out'

Parents who watch the BBC's parenting programs will certainly be familiar with this disciplining method. A misbehaving child is given a warning first. If this warning is ignored, the child is put on a designated chair and instructed to stay there for a certain period of time. This is determined by the age of the child, for example if the child is five, he will have to stay on the chair for five minutes, etc. The reason why he is there must also be stated to him, for example: "You are on the naughty chair because you did not listen to mommy." After the specific amount of time has elapsed, the child is then asked to apologize to those whom he has wronged. If he refuses to do so, he must remain on the naughty spot for the same time period as before.

If the child refuses to stay put on the naughty spot, he must be taken back by the parent in a non-confrontational manner. The parent must therefore calmly pick the child up and put him back on the spot until he stays there.

An alternative to the naughty chair is sending the child to his room where he is supposed to calm down. Once he feels that he is in control of his emotions, he can choose to exit and apologize.

Advantages:

This method gives a child a clear message that certain behaviour is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. It also gives the child the opportunity to get control over his emotions whilst he is in isolation.

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Disadvantages:

It might take a lot of effort and time to get a defiant child to stay on the spot or chair.

Some children may find this method humiliating, especially when it is used in a play group or school set-up where the child has to stand or sit in the same room as all the other children.

This method relies on strict external control by a parent to force a child to behave appropriately. It will not encourage the development of internal control over actions, because the message that it gives the child is: "If you do not do as I say, I will punish you by making you sit on the naughty chair." It is more likely to facilitate defiance than cooperation.

Reward systems

With small children an option is to reward desired behaviour by sweets or other tangible objects in a jar so that the child can see how every appropriate act will earn him rewards and how inappropriate behaviour will cause them to decrease.

Another option is using sticker charts, where good behaviour is rewarded by a sticker on a prepared chart. The child can be encouraged to make this chart himself and to put a sticker on after he behaved well.

Advantage:

Children can see what the direct consequences of their behaviour (getting rewards for good behaviour) are. He also learns what behaviour is appropriate.

Disadvantage:

Once again this is not a method that is likely to encourage the development of internal control. The message that the child gets is that if he acts in a certain way, he will be rewarded for this behaviour by his parents. The question is: will a child who is always rewarded for good behaviour not learn to only behave well when it is noticed by others or when he will be rewarded for it?

Using praise as reward

Praising our child is something that comes naturally: when our baby gives his first step we feel happy and we reward and encourage him by clapping our hands and saying: "Well done!" And this process of praise continues whilst the child masters every milestone or skill.

But do we want our children to be performing like monkeys in a circus in order to

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get our or other's positive attention? When a parent praises his child, the child will get an idea of what the *parents* are feeling. For example: "Well done, I am so proud of you!" How can we help them to focus on how *they* feel about something that they have accomplished rather than becoming dependant on our praise?

One way is to use encouragement. When a parent encourages a child, the parent will give the child a sense of what the child is feeling. For example: "I can see that you feel happy because you have managed to build that tower!" This helps him to focus on his own feelings of pride or accomplishment, rather than expecting others to notice his behaviour and reflect on this.

ALTERNATIVES TO PUNISHMENT

Faber and Mazlish (2001) encourage parents to demonstrate respectful communication and use alternatives to punishment. They give the following guidelines (p 110):

1. Express you feelings strongly –without attacking character.
"I am furious that my new saw was left outside to rust in the rain."
2. State your expectations.
"I expect my tools to be returned after they've been borrowed."
3. Show the child how to make amends.
"What this saw needs now is a little steel wool and a lot of elbow grease."
4. Give the child a choice.
"You can borrow my tools and return them, or you can give up the privilege of using them. You decide."
5. Allow the child to experience the consequences of his behaviour.
Child: Why is the tool box locked?
Father: You tell me why.
6. Problem-solve.
"What can we work out so that you can use my tools when you need them, and so that I'll be sure they're there when I need them?"

TEACHING CONSEQUENCES OF BEHAVIOUR

Regardless of the type of discipline that the parent chooses to use, it is very important that the child is aware of what the consequences of his behaviour will

be. This must be taught to him - and the parent must accept that this teaching process will be a continuous process - and, very importantly, followed through. Empty threats will give the child the message that a parent is not serious and that he can get away with the behaviour. But if the parent is consequent and does what she said she would do, the child learns that he will have to bear the consequences if he chooses to misbehave.

Making the child understand that his behaviour is a choice is also important. When a child is misbehaving, a parent can reflect on the behaviour by saying something like: "You can choose to jump on the coach and have no treats, or you can choose to stop and have treats." This makes him aware of his control over his actions, and the consequences of the actions.

So teaching consequences is also about setting boundaries for behaviour and teaching your child what is acceptable behaviour and what is not.

Steps in applying consequences

- Provide limited choices, but don't give one that you cannot live with.
- Accept the child's decision.
- Use suggestions rather than orders.
- Use a friendly voice.
- As you follow through with a consequence, assure children that they can try again later.
- If the misbehaviour is repeated, extend the time that has to elapse before he can try again or get the reward back.

Advantages:

This is a productive method of teaching your child responsibility for his choices. For example if he makes a choice to hurt someone, he must live with the consequences of this behaviour, as explained by the parent.

It also fosters independence and internal control, as he is empowered to make his own choices which are accepted and respected by his parents or caregivers.

Whereas punishment is associated with threat, consequences are based on goodwill and not retaliation.

Disadvantages:

Teaching a child about the consequences of his behaviour will take time. It is not something that the child will grasp in one or two days; it is a continuous process of teaching and reinforcing. It might also be difficult for young children to understand.

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Finding an appropriate consequence might be difficult sometimes. Dr. Charles Fay of the Love and Logic solutions (www.loveandlogice.com) describes a technique called “Energy Drain” as a practical way of creating a consequence that teaches responsibility. This method consists of the following steps:

Step 1: Deliver a strong dose of sincere empathy.

This is so sad.

Step 2: Notify the youngster that their misbehaviour drained your energy. Oh sweetie. When you lie to me (or almost any other misbehaviour), it drains energy right out of me.

Step 3: Ask how he or she plans to replace the energy.

How are you planning to put that energy back?

Step 4: If you hear, “I don’t know,” offer some payback options.

*Some kids decide to do some of their mom’s chores? How would that work?
Some kids decide to hire and pay for a babysitter—so their parents can go out and relax. How would that work?*

Step 5: If the child completes the chores, thank them and don’t lecture

Thanks so much! I really appreciate it.

Step 6: If the child refuses or forgets, don’t warn or remind. Remember: ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS!

Step 7: As a last resort, go on strike OR sell a toy to pay for the drain.

What a bummer. I just don’t think I have the energy to take you to Silly Willie’s Fun Park this weekend.

OR...

What a bummer. You forgot to do those chores. No problem. I sold your Mutant Death Squad action figure to pay for a babysitter tonight.

Guidelines for facilitating the development of self-control in your child

Self control refers to the ability to regulate behaviour and inhibit actions. Young children’s behaviour is mostly controlled by parents or other caregivers, but self control is internalised over time as children accept norms and standards that emphasise self control and become skilled in self control. This usually starts at the age of two when they realise that they are a separate, autonomous being whose actions have consequences.

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What can parents do to facilitate the development of self control?

Give:

- explanations for requests;
- strategies that emphasise individual control;
- limited options;
- suggestions rather than orders;
- explanations rather than arguments;
- opportunity for making choices.

General guidelines for facilitating the development of pro social behaviour in your child:

- Establish a warm and responsive relationship with your child. This social climate will influence the child's feeling about others.
- Model pro social behaviour, for example by friendly greetings or expressing your concern about others.
- Set up clear rules and principles that state the consequences of a child's behaviour will hold for others.
- Notice and reflect on pro social behaviour that your child displays.
- Express positive expectations about your child and his behaviour. For example: "I know that you will be able to share this cake with your friend."

Sources:

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