

PARENTING SKILLS: DISCIPLINE AND COMMUNICATION

I'm going to talk a little about discipline, what it is and what it isn't; then I'd like to get into how discipline issues interface with the family unit, and their relationship to communication between parents.

For some people, discipline ~~xxxxxxx~~ suggests other words, like disciplinary action, disciplinarian. To them, it is a hard, cold, unloving word, and whatever they say about discipline intellectually, in their hearts they don't want any part of it in their family.

To others, discipline is what the family is all about. Parents should be enforcers, punishers. Spare the rod and spoil the child!

Families with these extreme views usually end up in trouble. Families who have no rules and limits are chaotic, confusing places to live in; while families which glorify discipline tend to be overly rigid and controlling.

There is a place for discipline in the family, and that is what I would like to explore this evening. Clearly, an out-of-control child can create severe strain and tension in the home. And, as many of us have learned the hard way, the peace-at-any-price approach rarely works.

Discipline is simply one component of parenting, that component which relates to the management of child behavior. It has little to do with, and certainly is no substitute for, other aspects of parenting, such as love, nurturance, affection, and unconditional regard. These are all qualities ~~xxxxx~~ of the parent-child interaction essential to self-esteem. But without the possibility of appropriate behavior, intangibles such as affection and nurturance become difficult indeed.

The most effective way we know of managing behavior is through the application of behavior modification principles. I'm sure most of you have heard of these, read about these, and I am not going to go into an elaborate discourse in this area. Basically, behavior modification principles consist of ignoring poor behavior, rewarding positive behavior, and time-outs for extremely negative behavior.

What should a parent know to manage behavior?  
basic techniques: 1) clear commands 2) well-timed reinforcements 3) shaping of new behaviors with successive approximations 4) effective prompts of desired responses 5) utilization of discrete trials  
trial - giving commands, child's response, teacher's consequence need brief pause so child understands what is expected in what sequence



I would like to make 2 brief comments about punishment which is often considered an essential component of discipline, and the morality of modifying your child's behavior.

punishment usually succeeds merely in suppressing behavior, not teaching new behavior  
children whose parents rely excessively on negative approaches develop certain characteristic behaviors patterns  
learn to yell when someone doesn't do what he wants  
provocative - push parents further and further till punished  
may be overly controlled and inhibited (fear of punishment)  
observe behavior in 2 situations: 1) immediately after child does something right 2) immediately after does something wrong  
learn what child accomplishes through his behavior  
rewards, reinforcers not immoral - influence adult behavior too - everyone has incentives; more moral than punishment or letting grow up w/o behavioral controls  
material rewards not as important as immaterial praise  
gradual weaning of external control  
best reinforcement immediate

However, as many in this room, including myself, are undoubtedly aware, behavior modification doesn't always work as well in practice as it sounds in theory. There are many reasons for this, but I would like to deal with two which have to do with who we are as individuals, and who we are in relationship to our spouse.

Personal issues around discipline: Many of us are unable to punish a child without feeling guilty. Sometimes this has to do with our own feelings as a child: when we were punished (perhaps over-punished, either emotionally or physically), we ended up with the feeling that not only had we done something bad, but that we were bad. Our own poor parenting models make it difficult for us to discriminate between limit-setting and abuse.

Sometimes we have not fully grown into the parent role. This is certainly a developmental process, not something that happens all at once. For example, parents who are excellent care-takers of an infant, can lack many of the skills of effective limit-setting. Sometimes parents see themselves less as a parent, and more as a buddy to their child. They are afraid that if they "cross" the child, the child will withdraw love from them. *These parents rely on long arguments, rationalizations, cajoling because they are not really comfortable simply saying no - too afraid of consequences*  
Finally, some of us may have unrealistic expectations about appropriate behavior, attention spans, feelings for our young children. In this case, due to the parents' misconceptions, discipline is inappropriately imposed on a child; for example, requiring a 2 yr. old to sit through an hour meal.

*consequences  
kid's sense  
this ambivalence  
w/ frightening  
ease, and the  
consequence is a power-struggle  
w/ your child, in which  
the child usually wins.*



Interpersonal issues in discipline:

Many models of legitimate parenting exist: traditional, egalitarian, extended, permissive, authoritative; within limits, all styles are acceptable. The issue comes when parents advocate different styles.

parenting - when 2 people disagree, 3 possibilities:

- 1) sabotaging
- 2) withdrawal - unitary decisions
- 3) compromise and communication

One important issue which is rarely discussed prior to child-rearing is that of expectations. Two parents may bring two very different sets of expectations to the process of parenting. Where this often becomes particularly evident is in the area of discipline. Mom, harking back to her own childhood, may see dad as the rule enforcer: her job is to keep the lid on, until he comes home and administers the punishment. Dad, on the other hand, may be feeling that the last thing he wants after a hard day's work is to be the dispenser of justice in the family system. Clearly, parents have expectations not only for the roles they and their spouse will assume in the family system, but also have expectations for appropriate behavior in their child.

One parent may tolerate, and indeed enjoy, a significantly more permissive atmosphere than her spouse. The danger is that when these expectations are not brought to the surface and clarified, both spouses will end up feeling injured and violated by the other.

When a child with a disability is involved, sometimes one parent will take the view that this is a basically normal kid with a specific problem for whom allowances may be made on a situation-by-situation basis, but who should basically behave like any other kid. The partner of this person, however, may view her child as vulnerable, fragile, already having ~~xxx~~ been dealt a bad hand by life, and therefore not subject to the same standards as a nondisabled child. It is clear that these two views will result in very different ~~xxxx~~ parenting styles.

In addition to differing expectations, it is easy for parents to fall into power struggles regarding discipline. We all like to feel right, and nobody likes to feel wrong. When an issue is reduced to right and wrong, the result is guilt and defensiveness. It becomes less important to modify or correct the child's behavior than to prove your way is best, or that the child's misbehavior is not your fault.

It is easy for parents to introduce other issues when discussing discipline. For example, perhaps a mom who is home all day with her baby feels abandoned by her husband. She feels angry and hurt, but may not be able to say this directly to her husband. She may complain about the child's behavior as a way of showing how alone and unhappy

she feels. But if her husband attempts to become involved and makes a suggestion, she rejects it angrily, saying he doesn't understand anything about handling their child. She is not really angry about his suggestion (it may be pretty good), but she is using the child to punish her husband.

A key element in making discipline work effectively with your kids is communication. Parents need to talk to each other about their expectations, their feelings, and jointly problem-solve how best to approach their child. The specifics are unimportant: in one family, mom may have day-to-day decision-making power, while dad steps in on the big issues. In another family, parents may try to deal with problematic situations together. The important thing is that in some way generating a sense of shared responsibility lightens the load for both parents and creates feeling of mutuality, participation, and involvement. Equally important, when things don't work, no one solely is to blame.

pitfalls to avoid

don't say that's the wrong way to do it; when what you really mean is, that's a different way to do it; avoid unnecessary judgment

don't give away your power and expertise: I don't know anything about raising kids - that's my wife's department;

avoid insularity - ask for opinions of wise people you respect

learn to communicate - why does the other person feel so

strongly: learn to climb into each other's shoes; try arguing other person's pt. of view

make sure a behavioral problem in the child is not a

providing the arena to work out conflicts between each other

avoid the historical museum approach: How dare he tell me

to wear the baby to a cup when he hasn't washed the

dishes in a week?

conclusion



importance of negotiation  
compromise