

PARENTING

“ DISCIPLINE WHILE YOU CAN ”

Extracts from the book by Dr. J. Dobson

Doctor Dobson is one of America's top Childcare Consultants. His approach provides an alternative to the advice currently given to parents of “distract at all costs”.

THE CONTEST OF THE WILLS

This respect for strength and courage also makes children want to know how “tough” their leaders are. They will occasionally disobey parental instructions for the precise purpose of testing the determination of those in charge. Thus, whether you are a parent or grandparent or Boy Scout leader or bus driver or Brownie leader or a schoolteacher I can guarantee that sooner or later, one of the children under your authority will clench his little fist and challenge your leadership. He will convey this message by his disobedient manner: “I don't think you are tough enough to make me do what you say.”

When a parent refuses to accept his child's defiant challenge, something changes in their relationship. The youngster begins to look at his mother and father with disrespect; they are unworthy of his allegiance. More important, he wonders why they would let him do such harmful things if they really loved him. The ultimate paradox of childhood is that boys and girls want to be led by their parents, but insist that their mothers and fathers earn the right to lead them.

It is incredible to me that this aspect of human nature is so poorly recognised in our permissive society. Let me repeat my observation that the most popular textbooks for parents and teachers fail even to acknowledge that parenthood involves a struggle or contest of wills. Books and articles written on the subject of discipline usually relate not to wilful defiance but to childish irresponsibility. There is an enormous difference between the two categories of behaviour.

SHAPING THE WILL

It is obvious that children are aware of the contest of wills between generations, and that is precisely why the parental response is so important. When a child behaves in ways that are disrespectful or harmful to himself or others, his hidden purpose is often to verify the stability of the boundaries. This testing has much the same function as a policeman who turns doorknobs at places of business after dark. Though he tries to open doors, he hopes they are locked and secure. Likewise, a child who assaults the loving authority of his parents is greatly reassured when their leadership holds firm and confident. He finds his greatest security in a structured environment where the rights of other people (and his own) are protected by definite boundaries.

Our objective, then, is to shape the will during the early years of childhood. But how is that to be accomplished? I have talked to hundreds of parents who recognise the validity of the principle but have no idea how it can be implemented in their homes. Consequently, the remainder of this chapter has been devoted to specific suggestions and recommendations. We will begin with six broad guidelines which are paraphrased from my previous writings, followed by practical examples at each age level.

1. Define the Boundaries Before They Are Enforced

The most important step in any disciplinary procedure is to establish reasonable expectations and boundaries in advance. The child should know what is and what is not acceptable for those rules. This precondition will eliminate the overwhelming sense of injustice that a youngster feels when he is slapped or punished for his accidents, mistakes, and blunders. If you haven't defined it - don't enforce it.

2. When Defiantly Challenged, Respond with Confident Decisiveness

Once a child understands what is expected, he should then be held accountable for behaving accordingly. That sounds easy, but as we have seen, most children will assault the authority of their elders and challenge their right to lead. In a moment of rebellion, a little child will consider his parents' wishes and defiantly choose to disobey. Like a military general before a battle, he will calculate the potential risks, marshal his forces and attack the enemy with guns blazing. When that nose-to-nose confrontation occurs between generations, it is extremely important for the adult to win decisively and confidently. The child has made it clear that he's looking for a fight, and his parents would be wise not to disappoint him. Nothing is more destructive to parental leadership than for a mother or father to disintegrate during that struggle. When the parent consistently loses those battles, resorting to tears and screaming and other evidence of frustration, some dramatic changes take place in the way they are “seen” by their children. Instead of being secure and confident leaders, they become spineless jellyfish who are unworthy of respect or allegiance.

3. Distinguish between Wilful Defiance and Childish Irresponsibility

A child should not be smacked for behaviour that is not wilfully defiant. When he forgets to feed the dog or make his bed or take out the rubbish - when he leaves your tennis racket outside in the rain or loses his bicycle - remember that these behaviours are typical of childhood. It is, more than likely, the mechanism by which an immature mind is protected from adult anxieties and pressures. Be gentle as you teach him to do better. If he fails to respond to your patient instruction, it then becomes appropriate to administer some well-defined consequences (he may have to work to pay for the item he abused or be deprived of its use, etc.) However, childish irresponsibility is very different from wilful defiance, and should be handled more patiently.

4. Reassure and Teach After the Confrontation Is Over.

5. Avoid Impossible Demands

Be absolutely sure that your child is capable of delivering what you require. Never punish him for wetting the bed involuntarily or for not becoming potty-trained by one year of age, or for doing poorly in school when he is incapable of academic success. These impossible demands put the child in an unresolvable conflict: there is no way out. That condition brings inevitable damage to human emotional apparatus.

6. Let Love Be Your Guide

A relationship that is characterised by genuine love and affection is likely to be a healthy one, even though some parental mistakes and errors are inevitable.

COMMON ERRORS in PARENTING

1. AVOIDING CONFRONTATION

A child - let's say a girl - instantly detects parental hesitancy, parental guilt, parental cross-ness. These attitudes challenge her to resist requests and to demand more privileges. Her piskiness in turn makes the parent increasingly resentful inside, until this finally explodes in a display of anger - great or small - that convinces the child she must give in. In other words, parental submissiveness doesn't avoid unpleasantness; it makes it inevitable.

How accurate is this statement by Dr. Spock! The parent who is most anxious to avoid conflict and confrontation often finds himself screaming and threatening and ultimately thrashing the child. Indeed, child abuse may be the end result.

2. USE OF ANGER

This leads us to the most common error in disciplining children, and perhaps the most costly. I am referring to the inappropriate use of anger in attempting to control boys or girls. I touched this subject in "Dare to Discipline", but I feel it must be given greater stress at this point.

There is no more ineffective method of controlling human beings (of all ages) than the use of irritation and anger. Nevertheless, most adults rely primarily on their own emotional response to secure the co-operation of children.

Consider your own motivational system. Suppose you are driving your car home from work this evening, and you exceed the speed limit by forty miles per hour. Standing on the street corner is a lone policeman who has not been given the means to arrest you. He has no squad car or motorcycle; he wears no badge, carries no gun, and can write no tickets. All he is commissioned to do is stand on the curb and scream insults as you speed past. Would you slow down just because he shakes his fist in protest? Of course not! You might wave to him as you streak by. His anger would achieve little except to make him appear comical and foolish.

Disciplinary action influences behaviour; anger does not. As a matter of fact, I am convinced that adult anger produces a destructive kind of disrespect in the minds of our children. They perceive that our frustration is caused by our inability to control the situation. We represent justice to them, yet we're on the verge of tears as we flail the air with our hands and shout empty threats and warnings. Let me ask: Would you respect a court judge who behaved that emotionally in administering legal justice? Certainly not. This is why the judicial system is carefully controlled to appear objective, rational, and dignified.

I am not recommending that parents and teachers conceal their legitimate emotions from their children. I am not suggesting that we be like bland and unresponsive robots who hold everything inside. There are times when our boys and girls become insulting or disobedient and our irritation is entirely appropriate. In fact, it should be revealed, or else we appear phoney and unreal. My point is merely that anger often becomes a tool used consciously for the purpose of influencing behaviour. It is ineffective and can be damaging to the relationship between generations.

WHAT ABOUT SMACKING?

A smacking is to be reserved for use in response to wilful defiance, whenever it occurs. Full stop.

It is much more effective to apply it early in the conflict, while the parent's emotional apparatus is still under control, than after ninety minutes of scratching and clawing. In fact, child abuse is more likely to occur when a little youngster is permitted to irritate and agitate and disobey and pout for hours, until finally the parent's anger reaches a point of explosion where anything can happen (and often does).

Some professionals have inadvertently contributed to violence against children, because they have stripped parents of the right to correct children's routine behaviour problems while they are of minor irritation. Then when these small frustrations accumulate, the parent does resort to violence when he doesn't know what else to do.

SUMMARY

Under 7 months - No direct discipline, but don't fuss either.

8 - 14 months - Distract rather than punish.

15 - 18 months - Mild, infrequent smacking.

Above 2 years - Smacking if necessary.

Above 9 years - Little smacking now necessary, but allow them to suffer the consequences of their actions.