

THE SELF-DISCIPLINED CHILD

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When you realize you are increasingly setting limits, saying no, and scolding your child, it is time to stop and take a close look at your child and at your own parenting behaviors. A child's behavior is a symptom. It is a sign reflecting his or her normal developmental needs. To change a particular behavior, we must first understand its cause from the point of view of the child. When children's needs are met, their reasons to misbehave are reduced. Over time, these youngsters become more capable of positively directing their own behavior.

The self-disciplined child evolves from an environment that meets his or her developmental needs. These physical, emotional, and social needs are described in detail by Erik Erikson (1963) and Alice Miller (1981, 1983, 1984). The home environment that best meets these needs is one that nourishes a strong sense of trust and autonomy.

Trust

From birth on, children require relationships that foster trust. Research shows that babies who are held often and not left to cry unattended for what seems to them like a long time (60 to 90 seconds) grow into 6- and 7-year-olds with more stable, self-controlled, and resilient personalities than do those who cry without being quickly comforted. They also are more self-disciplined and less overly dependent. In the presence of caring adults, infants learn to trust that others will help them. They also gain confidence in their ability to get the attention they need.

The early development of trust depends on a predictable environment. The young child's world is most predictable when relationships with important adults and children are stable and lasting, and when daily life is composed of familiar routines. Routines are especially important during the most vulnerable times of day: early morning, nap time, mealtime, and bedtime. At these times, being tired or hungry tends to increase a child's sensitivity. A regular pattern of activity can go a long way toward guiding the child smoothly at these times. Children who have daily routines eventually trust themselves to move securely through the physically and emotionally frustrating parts of the day.

Why is it so important for infants to experience trust in their world?

First, trust allows for curiosity. Early curiosities are the seeds of later interests and achievements. When infants are attracted to a toy or a pile of blocks, they want to reach out. They want to grasp the toy or build with the blocks. As this curiosity wells up in them, so does a certain tension or anxiety. The source of this anxiety is uncertainty: the child has never grasped a toy or tried to build with blocks. If children have learned the external world is stable and predictable, they will reach out. Their curiosity will overpower their uncertainty. If they have learned the world is unstable and unpredictable, they will not reach out. They will fear being hurt or disappointed, and their anxiety will overpower their curiosity. Parents who create a trusting environment in their child's early years lay an emotional foundation that helps the child overcome uncertainty and anxiety. The child is able to reach out into the world with curiosity. This foundation serves the child's later learning and self-direction.

Second, a sense of trust in the world promotes self-confidence. When children experience the world as a nurturing, helpful, and predictable place, they risk reaching out to it. They show delight in achieving their goals. Interacting with people, nature, and things becomes an exhilarating experience. They know they can overcome anxiety, satisfy their curiosity, and take a first step toward inner security. This interaction with the world is often called *play*. When

children are free to play in a trusting environment, both their delight and their self-confidence expand. They learn they can successfully handle situations by themselves. In time, they become less dependent upon adults and more self-controlled.

Choice-giving

Toward the end of the first year of life, children begin to express a growing drive for autonomy. They want to be more independent. Although the earliest sign may be just a spark, now is the time to listen to their needs. Give the child plenty of opportunities to exercise his or her new sense of will in the area of daily living.

Parents don't always allow young children to make simple choices. Instead, their demands and requests engage young toddlers in a struggle for selfhood. The result is strong resistance. "No!" announces the toddler striving naturally for autonomy. This is a parent's signal to stop issuing demands and begin offering choices. Rather than "Now it's time to get dressed," ask, "Do you want to wear your green socks or your blue ones?" Rather than "I want you to brush your teeth," ask, "Do you want to brush your teeth with your red toothbrush or your green one?" Giving choices is a child-rearing technique in harmony with the child's developmental need to exercise his or her budding individuality.

The need to exercise the will is extremely strong in children from about 1 to 4 years of age. They want to make up their own minds and experience a sense of independence from their parents. Making choices helps them achieve a healthy sense of themselves. So offer plenty of opportunities! Even decisions that seem trivial to you as a parent may be very significant to your toddler.

Choice-giving is vital for parents, as well. Presenting appropriate choices can keep you from engaging in a battle of wills with your child. Present choices that will lead toward the desired behavior. The question "Which shirt would you like to wear today, the red or the yellow one?" leads to the desired behavior of getting dressed. However, refrain from offering too many or too frequent choices. This can overwhelm a child and provoke resistance or a loss of interest.

To see if your choice-giving is experienced as effective or overwhelming by your child, ask yourself a few questions. Does your child's response show you are creating alternatives that are attractive and achievable? Does your tone of voice attract your child's interest? Are you willing to live with whichever option your child picks? In other words, before asking, "Would you like to go to the playground or stay at home this afternoon?" check to be sure both options are possible. Your child's behavior also provides clues. Is he or she eager for the opportunity to make a decision? If so, you have probably been giving reasonable choices. Does he or she seem upset or uninterested in the idea? If so, reevaluate to see if better or fewer choices would help.

Also realize that choice-giving is not always possible. One day, for example, you may not be able to offer a choice for breakfast. However, you can offer choices in clothing or in the order of activities. You can always find occasions for choice-giving in daily life.

Additional Guidelines

The following parenting skills and disciplines contribute to a nurturing environment. These are not techniques, behavioral management strategies, or quick fixes. They are enduring processes that inspire positive behaviors in the early years. Over the course of time, skills and disciplines transfer from parent to child. As a result, the child becomes his or her own disciplinary agent. The youngster gradually becomes capable of self-regulation.

Remain physically aware. It is essential to remember that children need a proper diet, sufficient rest, and exercise. A youngster who has not eaten or rested enough during the day may start to act out of control. Until the age of 7 or so, the body undergoes cycles of growth that are

often rapid and stressful. A simple breakfast, lunch, and supper cannot provide sufficient fuel to meet the physical needs of these years. To prevent misbehavior caused by the hunger and tiredness accompanying physical growth, keep nutritious snacks on hand. Make sure your child has opportunities to rest or nap each day.

Use detective skills. The successful detective looks for motivating factors. By carefully studying the unlawful act from all sides, the detective develops an understanding of its purpose. Then the detective begins searching for the individual who, to satisfy personal needs, had to break the law.

Parents miss the mark when they focus attention on their child's misbehavior. Like a detective, you must look carefully for the underlying causes. Ask yourself, "What needs motivated my child to act this way?" Then examine the behavior from all perspectives. "Was my child tired, hungry, or bored?" "Are the developmental needs for trust and autonomy being met (from my child's point of view)?" "Is my child receiving adequate affection, attention, and recognition?" Using detective skills, you can usually uncover the frustrated developmental need or needs that gave rise to the misbehavior. Knowing this, you can prevent the establishment of negative behavior patterns.

Model desirable behavior. Young children reflect the attitudes and behaviors of their parents. In fact, parental activity defines acceptable behavior for a child. Quarreling, fighting, sarcasm, disrespect, swearing, and hitting are powerful negative influences. Why do children imitate some parental behaviors and not others? Young children are primarily attracted by excited or intense behavior. It draws their attention much like a strong magnet attracts a metal pin. For example, swearing is an intense emotional act that has a big impact on a child. The parent's loud voice, energized feelings, and emphatic gestures draw the child's attention. The child quickly senses the use of unacceptable words and exaggerated gestures are something special, something exciting to do. Soon the child may display the same mannerisms and vocabulary. Such misbehavior upsets and embarrasses many parents. Some react by scolding the child for doing what is developmentally normal—copying excited parental behaviors. Punishing or blaming a child for demonstrating these behaviors will not correct the problem. Parental self-discipline will. The well-disciplined adult produces the well-disciplined child.

Express your enthusiasm. The magnetic influence of parental excitement can be used to good purpose. For example, to encourage the enjoyment of books, you might share your own excitement while reading stories. By enthusiastically calling attention to a picture, you can inspire your child's interest in it. Parents who consistently show they are interested in and excited by a valued activity also generate and sustain their child's interest in it.

Of course, authenticity is important for success. Your interest needs to be real. Going through the motions of being excited won't inspire your child's interest. Children readily detect phony efforts.

Deal effectively with misbehavior. When misbehavior occurs, some parenting dos and don'ts can make all the difference. If a child hits someone and the parent responds by yelling or spanking, the parent's actions demonstrate that yelling and hitting are okay. Parents who discipline by shouting or spanking sow the seeds for their child's later adoption of these behaviors. The wise parent, on the other hand, will address the misbehavior directly in a nonthreatening manner. If your child hits someone, use your detective skills, yes! But also go calmly to your child, bend down so you are at eye level, and be sure you have your child's attention. Then explain calmly and seriously, "In this family, we do not hit."

Putting It All Together

Here is how one mother used these principles with her 2-1/2-year-old son. She was in the living room talking with a friend when her son began to interrupt their conversation. Using her detective skills, she realized her son needed someone to pay attention to him. She excused herself momentarily from the conversation, gathered some of his favorite toys, and placed them in a corner of the room where she could see them. For a little while, she played with her son and conveyed her excitement in what he was doing. After he became actively engaged in play, she returned to her conversation with her friend.

This mother could have scolded her son for interrupting, but she chose not to do so. She looked beyond the overt behavior to determine what developmental needs might have caused it. Then she creatively addressed the situation.

This approach to guiding a child's behavior works best when it is practiced from the time of birth. When we bring wonder and enthusiasm to a child's world from the start, the child's later play, learning, and behavior will reflect active, self-directed interest. But it is never too late to begin. Adopting new parenting behaviors in later years, although they may not produce immediate results, can make a tremendous difference in the long run. Don't be disappointed if at first your child resists the new way. The vital key to the development of a self-disciplined child is perseverance. Keep at it!

Self-discipline comes easily and naturally to children who are well guided. Strive to create a responsive environment that meets developmental needs—one that fosters trust and encourages autonomy. Learn to view behavior as a symptom. Ask yourself, "What good reason does my child have for that behavior?" Model desirable actions and extend personal enthusiasm to your child's world. When misbehaviors arise, deal with them in a straightforward way. The path to the self-disciplined child is the path shown by self-disciplined adults.

References

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