

Discipline is a necessary part of parenting yet it makes most parents feel uncomfortable. Some of those old disciplinary phrases such as 'spare the rod and spoil the child', 'teach them a lesson' or 'set children straight' are enough to send shivers up the spine of any reasonable-minded parent.

Discipline for the majority of the twentieth century was adult-centred and relied heavily on punishment as a way of keeping children on the right track. Discipline was based on the principle of severity and terms such as punishment, obedience and compliance were commonly used.

Corporal punishment was used in schools and smacking and variations of that theme were the general tools of trade used at home. Rewards and positive reinforcement for good behaviour were usually kept for the behaving children rather than used as a mechanism to encourage better behaviour in more difficult children.

The last few decades have seen some dramatic shifts in discipline that reflect very much the social changes that have occurred. In countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia discipline has swung between a very child-centred approach where it seems parents forgot that they were the adults in the parent-child relationship through to the use of parent-focused techniques that place control firmly in the hands of parents. The use of praise and a reliance on reward systems to promote appropriate behaviour are the hallmarks of these child-centred approaches.

Despite the variety of approaches available parents commonly struggle to get discipline right. Recent Australian research shows that 58 per cent of parents struggle to find the appropriate approach to disciplining their children. Most want to use different discipline techniques than their parents yet exactly which approach to use is a dilemma. As the same cohort rated developing positive attachments and good relationships with their children as their highest priority I suspect many parents are concerned with being friends to their children and tend to avoid those sticky discipline issues. Evidence from other parts of the world suggests that Australians are not the only parents who struggle to find an appropriate approach to discipline.

While the type of discipline parents use should reflect the times in which they live it is also useful to look to children and their needs. While society has changed significantly over the last few decades children and their developmental needs haven't altered much.

Children develop best in a stable environment where they are valued, loved and listened to. They prefer an orderly environment rather than a chaotic one. And they need someone in that environment who will help them learn to be safe and sociable. This is where discipline comes in.

Children in their first few years of life are hard work for any parent. This age group experience massive physical development that is not matched by the same rate of intellectual maturation. Children around the age of eighteen to thirty months are a little like international airports – massive amounts of activity but with relatively small control towers. They need parents who adopt a patient yet varied approach to discipline so that they learn to become sociable, stay safe and gradually take responsibility for their behaviour without having their spirit squashed.

Children in the 2-3 year age group present the most challenges to parents behaviourally, with the 11-14 year age group coming a close second. It is not surprising that these two ages present most difficulty to parents, as both are significant transitions stages with children in both age groups pushing their parents hard in the pursuit of greater independence.

Evidence suggests that parents of young children need to adopt a real-life approach to discipline that is heavy on teaching rather than the punitive stuff. My own work with families suggests that those parents who base their discipline on the twin principles of consistency and prevention have generally well-behaved kids and positive relationships as well.

The notion of consistency is the biggest challenge modern parents face. Dr. Sal Severe author of the recently published book for parents "How To Behave So Your Children Will Too" says, "Consistency is the most important element in a child's relationship with their parents." He is on the money. Children need parental consistency as it gives them a sense of security and control.

Consistency means parents dealing with the little misbehaviours and not letting them grow into bigger behaviours. It means parents following through and allowing children to experience a consequence when they misbehave. It also means that both parents in a dual parent relationship have a similar approach to behaviours. Children learn from a young age to play one parent off against each other when they standards differ.

But consistency is hard these days. Consistency, like routines, is often sacrificed by busy working parents and put in the 'too hard basket'. When parents are tired, stretched and overworked the last thing they want to do is engage in a battle with children over what are sometimes petty issues. Besides consistency can make a well-meaning parent who values relationships feel downright awful.

But giving in rather than being consistent and holding ground is not a smart long-term strategy. Kids learn quickly how far they can push a parent before they give in. If you give in occasionally they will learn that if they push you hard enough and long enough you will cave in. So consistency is about being strong and holding your ground. That is hard work because Australian research reveals that the average garden-variety child will push parental boundaries about 30per cent of the time and more difficult kids push your boundaries twice that much.

But what can parents do when young children are less than perfect? Smacking is one alternative but not one recommended by this writer. Most current studies indicate that parents generally don't view smacking as a suitable method of discipline for young children, however many reluctantly admit to reverting to this method on occasions. Smacking is generally ineffective in terms of reducing misbehaviour over the long-term. In some cases, it exacerbates aggressive behaviour in young children as they learn that it is okay to use physical means to resolve problems when you have the power to do so. The notion of 'it is okay to smack if it is a little smack' holds no water. It is either a smack or not. There is no middle ground.

So if smacking is out, what's in? Timeout is a good alternative, but often misused. Timeout is effective if used to either break a young child's pattern of behaviour or interrupt a deteriorating situation. A small amount of time spent in his or her room

has saved many a child's hide and his parents' sanity as they both have time to calm down. Those parents who use time-out as a punishment or a deterrent usually end up frustrated when they enter their child's room only to find him happily playing with toys. Timeout is a poor punishment but effective in helping to restore calm and giving children an opportunity to reflect.

Effective discipline with young children involves a refusal by adults to become involved in the behaviour games that they can play. Children don't act in a vacuum. They will keep those behaviours that work in terms of getting attention or some other pay-off and drop those behaviours that are ignored. So when a young child receives a long-winded reprimand from his mother as he purposely wriggles while she changes his nappy he is learning a great way to keep her busy. Similarly, a child who continuously stands up and sits down while he is being bathed is working out how he can have some fun at his mother and father's expense.

In both cases, it would be effective if the parent involved simply made the child safe and didn't respond verbally to the situation. Children in those cases generally learn that their parents are not engaging in the game they are making so they will try other ways to get some attention. However, it takes some children a while to understand so parents need to persist with their approach. Kids can't learn if we are giving them different signals – sometimes ignoring, sometimes laughing and sometimes punishing for the same behaviour.

The language a parent uses with young children can make a huge difference. Those parents who use the language of coercion and spend a great deal of time telling children what they want them to do will generally meet with a child who refuses to cooperate. Effective parents avoid over talking at the point of misbehaviour and don't try to fight children on every battlefield.

Effective discipline of young children involves more than simply applying the right technique or strategy to match a situation. If it was that simple then dog owners would teach us a great deal about gaining cooperation from kids. "Be consistent, praise the good stuff; teach one behaviour at a time and growl at bad behaviour" is the appropriate approach for our four-legged friends. If we want perfectly obedient kids then we know the formula.

Therein lies the dilemma. We need to raise cooperative kids capable of making their own decisions, to be considerate of others and generally survive as adults. This takes time and considerable teaching and patience, not to mention the use of routines, good parental behaviour for children to copy and the opportunity for children to find a place through contribution rather than misbehaviour.

The idea of healthy relationships lies at the heart of effective discipline. Kids will only cooperate in the long term if they feel their parents are fair, care for them and have their best interests at heart. Parenting by remote control or from a distance just won't cut it with many children.

The high priority parents place on healthy relationships with children is not compromised by the need to teach them appropriate, safe and socially acceptable behaviour. In fact, good discipline and a good parent-child relationship go hand-in-hand. Parents who don't have a firm backbone generally find that their children show them little respect, which is a recipe for relationship disaster. Discipline maybe

misunderstood these days but there is no mistake about its importance for children and parents.

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