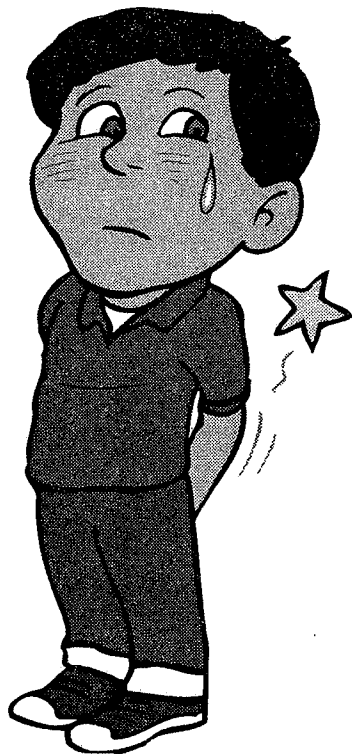


Discipline:

Are You Too



by Sol R. Rappaport, Ph.D.

Disciplining a child can feel like walking down a forest path and not being sure which way to turn at each juncture to get out of the forest. Before making a determination of which path to follow, it's helpful to look at how we choose a path. In other words, where do we learn our parenting skills and how do we decide what to do? Do we replicate what our parents did or do we choose a different path as a reaction to the path our parents chose? Or, do we choose a path somewhere in between? What do other parents do? We often look to friends for advice on how to handle difficult situations, but why are they better experts than ourselves?

Unfortunately for most of us, we haven't had the formal education in parenting and discipline that we did in academics, or even when we were taught how to drive a car. This article is designed to help parents choose a path for how to discipline their children when that juncture occurs.

While watching what our friends do with their children provides us with a comparison, it doesn't answer the question of how lenient is too lenient. In Webster's II dictionary, lenient is defined as "inclined to be forgiving and mild," "merciful," "not demanding" and "tolerant." These don't inherently seem like bad traits, yet we often think of leniency as being a negative word when it comes to parenting. Rather than trying to figure out if you are too lenient, it's better to ask if you provide consistency, structure, routine and follow-through with your children. You can be "lenient," that is, "forgiving" and "tolerant" and still provide the above. However, if you find you are giving in to your children out of guilt, or feel they manipulate you easily, you are less likely to be consistent and provide follow-through. The result could create problems for your child when the intention is to avoid upsetting your child or making him or her feel guilty. However, if you find that your child is fairly well behaved, responds to your limits/consequences well and does well with the structure and routine they are given, leniency may not be an issue you have to consider in the way most people view it. It's important to remember that you can't determine whether your parenting techniques are appropriate without considering the response of your child. Different children often have different needs in regards to routine, structure, consistency and follow-through.

If we view providing routine, structure, consistency and follow-through as ways to help children grow and develop, then the issues of leniency and strictness are no longer needed. Also, if you view discipline as teaching responsibility, it might be easier to follow through with

the consequences. Let me explain more about teaching responsibility. Parenting involves teaching children to be responsible for their actions. If we want them to be responsible adults, then we must teach them to be responsible children. This doesn't mean that they always do what we want (although it would be nice). It means that they have choices in behavior and can choose how to behave and accept, or at least deal with, the consequence, whether it is reward or punishment.

If clear rules and consequences are developed and you follow the guidelines below, you don't have to spend much time determining if you are too lenient or too strict. In other words, you can be "merciful" and "forgiving" and still be consistent, or strict, by implementing the consequence your child earned. If you follow the program you set up, the child can dictate what happens based on his or her behavior. The parent then becomes the person who follows through with the outcome, whether it is good or bad. You can be an understanding and sympathetic parent and still follow through because the child earned it. The following are strategies designed to help develop responsibility in children so they can make good decisions for themselves.

Effective Strategies to Teach Children Responsibility

AVOID POWER STRUGGLES

When you argue with children, you are giving them power they shouldn't have. Rather than arguing with them, explain to them what they did wrong and the nature of the consequence. Of course, if they know ahead of time what the consequences are for various actions

Lenient?

then it won't come as a surprise to them. If they begin to yell or argue, you can tell them that you will not discuss this with them while they are yelling and that when they are calm you will be happy to discuss it with them. You have the power to walk away when they yell. By doing this, you let them know that you care about what they have to say, but that it has to be done on your terms—calmly and respectfully. By doing this, you remain in charge as the parent because you are, in essence, taking charge of how issues get resolved.

TIMEOUTS

For young children, timeouts can be effective ways of teaching responsibility. Rather than review how to implement it here, borrow the video *1 2 3 Magic* by Tom Phelan from your local library or bookstore. Two of the most important points to remember are: (1) be consistent and (2) stay calm. Timeouts teach young children responsibility; if children can't follow certain rules, they will not be allowed to continue fun activities and need to take a break.

CHOICES

Another method of teaching responsibility is to offer your children choices regarding expected behaviors. By giving them choices, you create an opportunity for them to make decisions for themselves and learn how to be responsible for the outcome. Also, never give a choice you won't allow them to choose. For example, if you expect your four-year-old to take a bath and your intention is to make sure the child takes a bath, then don't let one of the choices you give be not taking a bath. That is, make sure you give choices that if chosen

you can live with for the time.

There are different levels of choices. This can be illustrated using the bath example. One possibility is to tell a child that he or she can either take the bath before or after a snack, television show or some other event. This, at times, can be effective because it gives the child a sense of control over a situation, even though they really aren't being given an option of what they do, only of when they do it (level 1). However, this might not be enough because there is no gain or loss from either choice. The child may still refuse to take a bath. An alternative is to tell the child that if she or he takes a bath before a certain event—for example, the start of the next television show—that he or she can have a snack after the bath. If the child chooses to wait, there will be no snack (level 2). Another approach is to simply tell the child that he or she can't do something until the bath is taken, such as watch television (level 3). However, this approach allows the child not to take a bath. If you choose this option, you have to be willing to accept their choice. Also, you should not alter the consequence once they choose their option. If you told the child that he or she cannot watch television until the bath is taken, and they respond with "okay," you should not add "and you have to go to bed now." If you are going to give choices, make sure you can accept the decision.

LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

When teaching children to be responsible for their behavior, it's important to help them understand that consequences can be a natural result of their behavior. For example, if you show up late for work, three logical consequences could be a deduction in pay, a shortened lunch break or having to stay late. These make sense.

If your child is late getting up for school in the morning, a logical consequence could be that the same evening the tardiness occurred, the child has to go to bed the same number of minutes earlier as he or she was late. Another logical consequence might be to have the child help you with chores around the house for however long they wasted your time in the morning trying to get the child ready for school.

The message to your child here is "Since you couldn't get your work done in the morning because you needed me

to assist you more than usual, you can help me with your work for the same amount of time."

It doesn't make as much sense to a child, or likely to you, to tell the child that he or she doesn't get dessert because he or she was late getting up in the morning. However, no dessert is a good logical consequence for not eating a healthy dinner.

Here's one last example. If your child repeatedly watches television after school and doesn't finish homework done before bedtime, the following day there should be no television until the homework is done.

When using these or other logical consequences, I can't say enough about how important it is to have the rules and guidelines set up ahead of time so the child can predict what happens. A good reference on logical consequences is Chapter 6 from Don Dinkmeyer's book *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting*.

TRADITIONAL REINFORCEMENT CHARTS

These types of charts can be developed so that each day the child demonstrates certain behaviors—for example, making their bed and getting dressed on time—they can earn points, which can be traded in for something later. This is another strategy of choice giving because your child has a choice to earn the points or not earn them.

However, to use this system correctly, it is helpful to consult with a specialist (often a social worker, psychologist or teacher) who has experience developing these systems and understands child development. At times the systems will work, but the manner in which children earn rewards doesn't always work for a particular child.

There are also several books on the market which describe how to develop these systems. No matter what method you use, giving choices can often be a successful way of creating positive behaviors at home and at the same time giving a child a sense of control and responsibility.

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