**ow to Make Discipline a Positive Experience**

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Mandy, a 16-year-old, says, "Although I get sick of their rules, I would feel bad if my parents just let me do whatever I wanted." Amber, who's 15, agrees: "We want (consciously or unconsciously) for our parents to be firm and set limits. It's a form of security for us and them."

As dads, we can appreciate these kids' willingness to admit what we know to be true, at least in theory-that kids do gain security and confidence when we set appropriate limits and consistently enforce them. We just wish our kids would recognize the benefits of discipline before they're 15 or 16. And we wish Amber were right in saying that we too gain security from carrying out discipline. For too many of us, it's more of a daily struggle, or even a roll of the dice.

Part of our struggle and confusion is a result of the scary extremes we're all trying to avoid. We've all seen, or perhaps grown up under, the "formula father," who goes too far with discipline. He demands perfect order and obedience, and there is wrath to pay for the child who steps outside his boundaries or gets on his nerves.

But we also want to avoid the other extreme, the "freewheeling father." He knows there are no guarantees with children anyway, so why worry so much about discipline? Some of these dads adopt the view that we should never upset our children in any way or deny them of something they want.

Where's the happy medium? How do we teach our kids responsibility and self-control without losing control ourselves?

**CHECK YOUR BAROMETER**

Most of us know the basics of good discipline: clearly communicating reasonable goals and expectations, and consistently enforcing appropriate consequences when children step outside the boundaries. But how we carry out those steps makes all the difference.

It's all in the atmosphere. Some fathers wait to deal with their children until they've been pushed past their limit. They're frustrated, possibly angry, and the atmosphere of the discipline is hostility-and, for the child, fear.

When we exercise behavioral control without love, the results are harmful at best and barbaric at worst. The focus shifts from the child's disobedience to the tense emotions, and we lose whatever opportunity we had to teach the child valuable lessons.

But everything changes in an atmosphere of acceptance and love. We are under control, doing what we know is right, not reacting unpredictably in the heat of the moment. Instead of resenting or rebelling against us, our children grow to respect us more. They know they are loved and accepted even when their behavior isn't. They know we are acting for their benefit, not ours.

**KNOW WHAT'S APPROPRIATE**

***Know Your Child***. Some principles of discipline work pretty well with most children, and some don't. Some children are crushed just seeing that they've disappointed their dad. Others will keep pushing until they get a reaction, and some will keep fighting back even after they've been disciplined. For some kids, it's enough to sit them in the corner and deny them social contact with others. Others demand more active consequences such as missing meals, losing privileges or spanking (in at atmosphere of love). Make sure you know how to get through to your child in the most effective way. For insights into how your child thinks, reacts and learns, we recommend the book ***Talkers, Watchers & Doers*** by Cheri Fuller.

***Know Yourself***. Maybe you have problems controlling your emotions; or maybe you have strong feelings about spanking because of the reasonable goals away your father disciplined or abused you. Those issues can come flooding back and overpower you at just the moment when your child needs your love and acceptance the most. You'd be wise to deal with those issues and make decisions about how you'll exercise discipline before the next confrontation with your child.

If there's any doubt about your ability to control your emotions, set a time to deal with your child later. Give yourself time to calm down, reassess the situation (with your wife), and then deal with the problem when you're sure you can keep the childÍs best interests in mind.

***Let the Punishment Fit the Crime***. The best consequences have a direct connection to the mistake or problem. Situations which carry natural consequences-as long as they're not harmful-do the best teaching. If you're neglecting responsibilities at work, your boss doesn't take away your DVD player. He passes over you for a raise, or he fires you. Chances are you'll do better next time.

If a young child refuses to eat what's placed in front of him or misbehaves at dinnertime, letting him go hungry for one evening will probably send the message better than a spanking. Or, if a daughter continues to leave her bicycle outside after she's ridden it, denying her the use of her bike will probably get through to her better than grounding her.

An arbitrary punishment provides your child with an escape from the natural consequences of her actions, and chances are good that her anger will be directed toward you, not toward her own irresponsibility. Natural consequences are how the real world works, and we help our children by preparing them while theyÍre still at home.

**USE LOVE AND LOGIC**

Foster Cline, M.D. and Jim Fay believe that "responsible behavior has a direct correlation to the number of decisions children are forced to make." If we allow them to make their own mistakes while they're young and the consequences are still relatively harmless, they'll learn responsibility in preparation for the more momentous decisions down the road. Cline & Fay's book ***Parenting With Love and Logic*** details their approach.

***Offer Choices***. According to the authors, the best way to set limits on behavior is to ask well-reasoned questions or offer choices. If a child talks back disrespectfully, raising your voice and saying, "Don't talk to me that way!" only transfers responsibility for the problem to yourself and forfeits control of the situation to the child. Instead, offering a choice helps you regain control while leaving the responsibility with your child. You might say, "You really sound upset. I'll be glad to listen when your voice sounds as soft as mine is."

Instead of yelling, "I want that lawn cut, now!" you say, "I'll be taking you to your soccer game as soon as the lawn is cut." You still insist on respect and obedience, but you use calm, thinking words instead of fighting words, and the children decide whether to comply or face the consequences.

You can't force good behavior on your children, but you can give them the choice to change their behavior or go somewhere else; to eat their dinner nicely or leave the table and miss a meal; to pick up their toys or pay someone else to do it.

***Let the consequences do the teaching***. If the child does end up enduring the consequences, be sure not to rub it in or lecture him on the lesson he just learned. Keep the responsibility squarely on your child's shoulders by staying calm and showing empathy. If a child has "chosen" to miss a meal, but later complains that she's hungry, you could respond with, "I'm sure you are. That's what happens when I miss a meal. Don't worry. We'll be sure to have a good breakfast."

We should adopt the attitude that our children's mistakes are opportunities for them to grow. Instead of jumping in ourselves, letting them off the hook or giving advice, we listen, empathize and encourage them to take responsibility for solving the problem. We might say something like, "I see why you're upset. What do you plan to do about it?" When children can solve their own problems, they feel much better about themselves.

Ultimately, healthy discipline is about relationship. We need to banish the idea that it is an event-an in-and-out, one-shot act of punishment, and view it instead as a process. It's part of the way we relate to our children every day, whenever we're together. We're always modeling a virtuous life, communicating a positive vision for their lives, and imparting a healthy respect for authority and justice.

We're seeking to create an environment in which they'll become self-disciplined-confident, self-controlled people who make wise choices, take responsibility for their actions, and proactively work to fix their problems. And they become positive models in a world largely without discipline.