

## Balance of Acceptance, Discipline Dicey

by Dean Walker

**The** kids are fighting again. The 6-year-old threatens to hit the 4-year-old with a plastic bat because the younger one threw his smelly socks into the older one's face. Do you ignore it, or banish both to their rooms?

Your 5-year-old is angry because you've said no, he can't play next door because it's too close to lunch time. He says, "Fine!" and blows you a raspberry.

Is that an acceptable expression of anger, or grounds for discipline?

In the dominant American culture, it is primarily a parent's responsibility to teach appropriate behavior and discourage misbehavior. This often requires us to stop a child from doing "what comes naturally."

The undisciplined child may fail to learn respect for others and might even put others at risk of harm. At the same time, we recognize that it is up to parents to imprint on their children's hearts and minds the message of unfailing love.

Children who are continually criticized or punished, who don't get the message of acceptance, will find it difficult to grow into self-respecting adults. How can parents be successful at two tasks that seem so directly opposed? Where lies the balance between acceptance and discipline?

Many systems of childrearing tout solutions to the acceptance/discipline puzzle. These systems (including your own parent's homespun version) can help parents rear children responsibly, but none can be called The Truth. (Sorry, Mom and Dad!)

This is both worrisome, because it implies that there is no Right Way to parent, and relieving, as we need no longer be paralyzed with guilt that comes from feeling incompetent when we are confused about the right thing to do in a given situation.

Systems of parenting tend to break down sooner or later, always when parents need them most. It is just as well that parents recognize that the fault lies in the system and not in them!

Certainly you have noticed that the experts who developed these systems (except Grandma and Grandpa) don't live at your house, they've never met your child, and they were not there to hold the baby, answer your phone, and stir the rice during your 3-year-old's last tantrum.

In the end, achieving a balance between acceptance and discipline means using your informed judgment about that balance in your relationship with your child in whatever circumstances you find yourself.

Perhaps the best way to achieve a balance of acceptance and discipline, to teach children to be people respectful of self and others, is to relate to them as we should to any human being.

That doesn't mean we would tell our 5-year-old to get a job and an apartment the next time she loses attitude control. It doesn't mean telling an infant crying in the night to feel free to fix a snack, but kindly pipe down.

But it does mean using the same four principles of healthy relating:

**The Equality Principle:** All human beings are made of the same priceless "stuff."

Children do not have the experience they need to make as many decisions for themselves as an adult does. Even if they don't have an equal vote, they have equal value.

**The Empathy Principle:** The first step of healthy relating is placing yourself into the other person's shoes, to understand as well as you can his point of view.

We respect this point of view as far as possible without disrespecting ourselves. This first step holds vast importance in our relationships with everyone, but particularly with children. It is here, in understanding our child's experience, that the input of experts on child development becomes useful when paired with our own careful observations about our particular child.

**The Assertiveness Principle:** The next step of healthy relating is stepping back into your own shoes, for your point of view (as a fellow priceless human being) must also be respected.

It is vital that you do this relating two-step (Empathy, then Assertiveness) in the correct order, or you will end up stepping all over everybody. This has been unfortunately common in the history of childrearing.

**The Interdependence Principle:** Interdependence is the highest order of relating.

Dependence is respected in the growing person and is recognized as necessary and healthy for everyone some of the time. Independence is taught or expected when a child (or adult) is ready, because it is in taking care of oneself that one begins to be able to take care of others when appropriate.

Once we know the basic two-step of Empathy/Assertiveness, we can dance with anybody, including our children. Thinking about relationships with children in the framework of these four principles of relating helps us understand the universal human condition (we're not alone!), and at the same time, points out the uniqueness of every relationship-dance, owing to the special characteristics and circumstances of the partners. There are no "one size fits all" solutions to the challenges in any relationship, including the challenge of balancing acceptance and discipline in parenting.

Trust yourself. You'll make mistakes, and sometimes you'll feel confused and uncertain. Educate yourself by reading, attending workshops or classes, and talking with other parents. Keep an open heart and mind. Be mindful. Pay close attention to the consequences of your actions. Trust yourself.

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Original publication date: 04/24/1995 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon