

Discipline's Goal is to Teach Children Self-Control

by Linda Reilly

There are probably as many approaches to discipline as there are parents. Managing children's behavior is possibly one of the most demanding and confusing challenges that parents face.

Many parents read several "how-to" manuals on child rearing, only to find significant differences of opinion among the experts. Because children and parents are different and families are unique in style and situation, each picks its own direction in discipline.

We tend to equate discipline with punishment. Yet the Latin base for the word discipline is "to teach." The dictionary expands the meaning of discipline to include "training that develops self control, character...."

It is useful for parents to think of discipline as education because this perspective provides more options when parents face behavior problems. Most parents naturally use a teaching approach. They encourage certain behaviors through praise, and they talk to children about the consequences of their behavior. These are all aspects of discipline, of helping children to develop self-control.

The goal of discipline is to teach children how to control their own behavior. By the time children are 18 or 19 years old, parents generally agree that they are ready to try living on their own. The road to independence, self-management and self-control is a long journey for the child. We, as parents, are their guides.

Children are born with no understanding of rules, fairness or the needs of others. They learn these concepts over time through interactions with their parents. A child, for example, will experience disapproval from his mother when he pulls on a cord in an electrical outlet. After several times, he will associate his mother's disapproval with touching the cord (although he may still not be able to control the impulse to pull on it!). Eventually he will control this impulse to avoid parental disapproval and the accompanying guilt feelings. After many years and hundreds of learning trials like this, the child will control his impulses because it makes him feel good to do so.

The process by which children learn the standards of their parents and society is called "internalization." This is an important part of developing self-control.

Because discipline is teaching, it readily becomes part of the daily routine in families with young children and is usually carried out smoothly and automatically. Yet each of our discipline decisions is influenced by many factors, such as the family's values and basic beliefs, the child's stage of development, the structure of the family, past personal experiences, and the current family environment. As a result, each family's approach will be unique and will even change as children grow and the family circumstances change.

Every family needs a bag of tricks. The range of children's behavior is virtually unlimited. The wise parent will have a bag deep and wide that will meet this challenge. Non-confining

techniques use the parent's influence and do not directly confront the behavior, whereas confining techniques use the parent's power and directly restrict the behavior. For example, a toddler advances toward the forbidden television controls. A non-confining strategy would be distraction—the parent interrupts the child by offering her an attractive toy. A confining strategy would be to pick the child up and remove her from this temptation. There is neither a right nor a wrong answer.

Another example: A toddler whines persistently every night at dinnertime. One set of parents feels they cannot tolerate such a disturbance during a time that is precious to them. The parents decide to utilize a time-out approach (which is confining because it directly confronts the behavior) to teach the child that this is unacceptable behavior. On the other hand, another family, who may have a higher tolerance for whining or deciding that the child is just tired, might use distraction or simply release the child from the high chair.

In general, it is useful to save the most confrontational or confining methods for those behaviors you consider most important to change. It would be exhausting to be constantly confining behavior.

One 2-year-old was known to have been put into time-out 10 times before 9-o'clock in the morning for various uncooperative behaviors. Not only did he continue to be uncooperative all day, but also his relationship with his mother was in shambles. If we find ourselves confining behavior too often, it is time to reevaluate the situation and reach into the bag of tricks.

As children approach adolescence, parents rely more often on non-confining discipline. It is physically impossible to remove a teenager from the television controls when it is time to get started on homework. Using methods that engage an adolescent's cooperation will be most useful.

Many methods will not seem to be "disciplinary" in nature, but they are all tools that redirect, train and teach behavior. Some of them will avoid punishment situations while teaching appropriate behavior, which is the goal of discipline.

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Original publication date: 06/28/1992 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon