

Discover Roots of Children's Discipline Problems to Create Change

by Truus Jansen

In thinking about discipline, we first need to look at the concept of "bad" behavior. When children feel connected, confident, and good about themselves, they tend to be flexible, easy going, and a pleasure to be with. When children are unreasonable, they have temporarily forgotten their goodness and connection to us, and they are asking for our help. To work toward real and long-lasting change, we need to figure out what lies at the roots of the problems our good children are having.

1. In analyzing unacceptable behavior, there are some useful distinctions we can make that will help us figure out how to respond in any given situation. We are usually dealing with one of four issues:
2. **A child who is responding to intolerable outside pressure.** Small children can get painfully bored waiting in a restaurant or a busy check-out counter. A child may cry, wander off, spill things, pull things off the shelves, and in general, not behave well. Our teenagers burdened by peer pressure in drug-infested high schools, may give drugs a try.
3. **A child with an honest difference of opinion.** What is too loud? What is too messy? When are they hungry or sleepy? Is our children's perception of what is comfortable and appropriate any less valid than ours? Of course it makes sense to communicate our needs and to ask for their understanding and cooperation, but we don't have to label them as the source of the problem. *"Could you play that game outside, because I have a headache?"* is more likely to elicit a positive reaction than *"Stop being so loud!"*
4. **A child who is lacking information.** Children are not always aware of the consequences of their actions. Sometimes they just need a piece of information that we can offer them in a calm and friendly tone of voice. *"If you throw that hard object, it could really hurt someone."* *"When you don't call and tell me where you are, I can't do anything but worry about whether you are all right."*
5. **A child who is hurting.** When lessening the outside pressure, striking a compromise, or giving information does not change the problematic behavior, we are most likely dealing with a child who is hurting. Our first step should be to notice, observe for awhile, and gather information. What might be going on for a child who always argues and is unreasonable about any request for cooperation? Is this young person reacting to difficult reality over which he has no control (divorce, absence or illness of a parent, new sibling, loss of friends, new school)? Just dealing with the behavior, whether it is hitting, lying, refusing to cooperate, staying out late, etc., fails to address the underlying reasons and will not resolve the problems in the long run.

SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

In the immediate situation, a firm limit plus active follow-up may be necessary: *"You need to stop throwing that toy, or I am going to put it away,"* or *"I can't let you drive the car until you can agree to return it on time."*

Limits are best set in a friendly, matter-of-fact tone of voice, while staying physically and emotionally close (keeping in mind that the acting-out child is feeling isolated, unsure, unloved, and bad about bigger issues).

Often when we set a limit, the young person will begin to cry or rage and pour out a bunch of feelings. She will say things that sound unreasonable and inaccurate: “*You don’t love me anyway,*” “*You never let me do what I want,*” “*I can never do anything right,*” etc.

At this point it will not work to reason with the arguments, but if we just listen, a whole load of pent-up bad feelings can be expelled. This can clear the way toward more flexibility.

Sometimes children will tell you what they are really hurting about: “*I miss Daddy,*” or “*I don’t like it when you and Mummy fight.*”

Often children can’t name the real upset, but they wisely use the limitation as an opportunity to get rid of all kinds of strong feelings about deeper griefs and fears.

In the long run we can think about setting up situations for our children in which they have a chance to deal with some of these bigger underlying feelings.

If a child is angry about having to share Mom with a new baby, we can create special times with the older one on a regular basis. If a child feels powerless because he is the youngest in the family, we can set up playtimes where he can be the boss, the bigger one, who gets to order everybody else around.

If a child has had physical problems, an operation or an illness, we can encourage playtime where she gets to be the doctor and gives us shots, while we wildly but helplessly protest.

Children will take this kind of attention, “bank” it, and draw from the good feelings when times get rough.

In general, spending time on a regular basis with each of our children, where they get to play with us on their terms without distraction, will go a long way toward helping a child feel loved, connected, and valued.

This process is not easy. It will take time from our already busy and sometimes overwhelming lives as parents, but in the long run it will help greatly to reduce the need for discipline and create more relaxed cooperation.

Truus Jansen was a counselor who worked with families and children when she wrote this article for the *Birth To Three* column in *The Register-Guard*.