

Parents Need to Balance Acceptance, Discipline

by Dean Walker

Part 1 of this series, two weeks ago, described four principles of healthy relating for parents to use in order to balance acceptance and discipline in their interactions with their children. Those four principles are Equality, Empathy, Assertiveness and Interdependence. The two principles that concern us most in balancing acceptance and discipline are Empathy and assertiveness.

To use the Empathy Principle well with children, we must remember that the Equality Principle refers to worth, not to ability or characteristics. This seems obvious to us when our children are helpless infants, and the empathy/assertiveness dance feels almost effortless. It is so natural that we are not even aware that we are doing it. For example, when our newborn infant cries in the middle of the night, we get up and nurse or provide a bottle, because we understand the baby's point of view in light of the stage of development.

The information we bring from Empathy (about the other's perspective) to Assertiveness helps us set our boundaries to meet the legitimate needs of our children and ourselves. To an older child or adult who woke us up in the middle of the night saying, "I'm hungry!", our assertiveness boundaries would be set to protect our valuable sleep. It is ultimately the parents' judgment when a child's need for a midnight interaction is outweighed by the parents' need for sleep.

As our children age, they become less obviously different from us. But it is important to our feelings about and reaction to our children's behavior that we recognize continuing differences in neurological and psychological maturity. Most 4-year-old children cannot ride a two-wheel bike or read. This is not from lack of practice or opportunity, but because of neurological immaturity. This makes it difficult for young children, even to the age of 6 or 7, to inhibit behavior that sometimes seems outrageous to us. Striking out physically or going into a rage from frustration can be normal behavior for young children, just as crying from hunger in the middle of the night is normal behavior for an infant.

Psychological immaturity makes it difficult to reason with children, to get them to focus on the needs of the situation or of other people. Self-centeredness is the result. Mix in the willfulness that naturally arises from the child's striving to separate and become self-directed, and, viola, you have a little human being who drives its loving parents up the wall just by acting normal. Clearly, understanding child development is important to our ability to step into our child's shoes and use the Empathy Principle to balance our assertive parenting.

While aggressive, impulsive, and self-centered behaviors may be normal for young children, they are not "acceptable" to us because we know that they will lead to problems in living if the children do not learn more peaceful, sociable modes of interacting. But growing up is an organic process, not a mechanical one. Parents are not building socially acceptable adults mechanically, from scratch. Children come into the world as seeds of their future selves. As a corn seed grows, organically into a corn plant, a child grows into an adult.

To use the Empathy Principle, we must remember that every child who acts aggressively, impulsively, or selfishly is displaying behavior that is as normal in the organic process of growing up as it is "unacceptable" in mature people. Let's develop the analogy of the corn seed. Believing

that children should, if well parented, always produce adult-like, socially acceptable behavior would be like expecting a young corn plant to immediately produce corn. When the plant instead sprouts those alien looking tassels instead of ears of corn, then what? If we did not know that tassels were a part of growing, healthy corn, we might cut them off, thinking they are some sort of abnormal growth to be eliminated. This would be bad news for the grown-up corn plants. We might have “acceptable” looking plants, but we would never get corn.

Balancing acceptance and discipline means accepting the “tassels” of childish behavior as normal. Cultivating this understanding in the Empathy Principle helps us balance our use of the Assertiveness Principle with our young children, just as we do with infants. Confronted with childish behaviors, instead of “cutting them off” (with drastic mechanical measures like physical punishment, long periods of isolation, or emotional abandonment) we hang in there and hold, shape, channel, and cultivate. You might call this organic parenting.

What are the guidelines for using the Assertiveness Principle in organic parenting?

- No hitting.
- Focus on behavior, not character. (Say, “That was a mean thing to do,” not, “You’re mean.”)
- Leading children to feel “earned” guilt for behavior that hurts others is helpful. Shaming them for being bad is not.
- Keep consequences short and focused if possible. For example, a short time-out, grounding, or privilege withdrawal is generally better (and much more likely to be enforced) than a long one. A “focused” consequence would be grounding from a particular activity. For example, say, “You need to play inside until after lunch, because you’re digging holes where I asked you not to,” instead of, “You will sit on your bed for the rest of the day, and don’t even think.”
- Check your expectations. What do you accept in yourself, but punish in your children? Anger, willfulness, sarcasm, white or other colored lies, hating something, making mistakes, spilling the milk, cursing, or craving chocolate?
 - Don’t be afraid of conflict. Though it may be tiring, even daily conflict does not mean your family is dysfunctional. Just fight fair, and use the four principles of relating.

Finally, balancing acceptance and discipline requires parents to be proactive, not always reactive. Create opportunities to interact with your children in nondirective, nonjudgmental ways. As far as you can in self-respect, follow your children’s lead in conversation or play. Tell them you love them at least once a day. Give them laps to sit on, cuddles, hugs, and piggy-back rides. Think of these interactions as deposits in the “acceptance” account. When the need to discipline arises, children can emotionally draw on that account for balance. It’s better than money in the bank.

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