

Parenting Corner-Training Your Children

4/8/2009

When a child misbehaves or shirks responsibility, what should good discipline look like? Here are a couple of questions to ask before you tackle the problem.

- Is my response really more of a reaction? Did I take time to choose how to handle this? Am I angry, offended or embarrassed?
- Do I just want to get even with the child for what they did?
- Is this about me or about helping the child grow and learn?
- Am I being lazy by not addressing the behavior – perhaps because I am too tired or too busy to parent right now?

Dr. James Dobson wrote a book called *Parenting Isn't for Cowards*. Sometimes it takes all the confidence and energy we have to deal with parenting. I remember thinking, “Oh, no, not *now!*” when my kids would pull something in public or when I was exhausted. These things seldom come up at a convenient time.

The important thing is that we realize we've been given a job to do, to train up these little human beings. No one else can do it quite the way we will. Heaven knows we will make mistakes, even if we promise ourselves *not* to make the ones we think our parents made.

Thinking out several priorities will help us be prepared for the inevitable “opportunities” that we will be faced with. First, establish a family behavior standard. What is acceptable at home? Speaking with respect to everyone in the family? Waiting to be excused from the table? Good manners? Certain chores? Obeying quickly so safety is not endangered? By identifying what the standard is, you will find yourself correcting your child to bring them up to the standard. Discussing that these same standards apply when you are in public will help your child feel confident and secure.

Second, teach the child that they are the ones who get to make the choice. They can behave according to the family standard and enjoy life, or they can violate the family standard and reap the consequences. Either way, it is THEIR choice. Discipline equals consequences, not punishment. It's simply a matter of sowing and reaping. Our Love & Logic classes teach parents to prepare empathetic statements for the times when kids choose badly. “Bummer,” or “How sad for you...” are two of my favorites.

Three, accept that all human beings make bad choices from time to time. The younger we learn, the easier our adult life will be. The goal is not to prevent every mistake, but to teach kids to choose wisely on a more and more consistent basis in life.

Four, remember that your anger is not supposed to be the punishment. You want them to remember the lesson, not your emotional outburst. This isn't about your embarrassment or about getting even for what they've done. Older children will come to think that you are the problem, not their behavior, if discipline is an emotional do-dah instead of a learning process.

Five, explain consequences in advance. Give a warning. Educate the child, even to the point to telling how he will feel and how you will feel if they make the wrong choice.

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“Caroline, your rowdiness is escalating. If you hurt your sister, you will have to apologize, and then do something nice for her, like make her bed. You can slow down and play nicely, or you can spend some time serving her. What choice would you like to make?”

Six, accept that as a parent, you are the enforcer. Parenting is hard work. My husband says, “Make discipline the first response, not the last resort.” If you don’t do it, someday the police will have to. Yes, it takes time and attention. A wise person once said, “Discipline your son while they are young, and you will have peace.” This job does not go away if you ignore it.

Seven, do not rescue your child from consequences. The behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated. If you don’t address an infraction, the child will be bolder in gambling that you won’t next time. Younger children often learn by watching older ones get in trouble. They may decide that certain behaviors are not worth the hassle. If you threaten a consequence for a certain behavior, keep your word. Avoid outlandish punishments such as, “I’ll hang you up by your thumbs for that!” Of course you won’t, and the child will not take you seriously. I used to tell my kids, “I don’t threaten. I only promise.” Keeping my word about consequences made things stable for them. Carefully consider whether you want to follow through with a punishment before you threaten it. You are making a commitment. Be prepared to stop everything to follow through. Acknowledge that there may be impact on others if your plan must be carried out. If one child can’t go to a party as a result of poor behavior, don’t make the siblings stay home as well. You may have to get a babysitter for the offender, so others are not also punished.

Eight, don’t use multiple punishments. If you say, “Going over on your phone minutes will result in the loss of your phone,” follow through with it. But don’t also ground them for 2 weeks, and take away their stereo as well. That’s over-doing it. It will breed resentment and possibly rebellion in your child. Measure the consequence to match the level of the infraction. Make the duration something that fits their age and attention span. A week of no TV has little meaning for a three-year-old who has a 1 or 2 day memory of wrong doing. Grounding a teenager for 6 months would only be appropriate for something that was life-threatening. Think about how long will be meaningful compared to the infraction. Again, this is not about you getting even or how frustrated you are with the child.

As a parent, you have a lot of control of the system of discipline in your home. If you choose wisely and follow through, you’ll find your children will make more and more wise decisions. Your workload in this area will eventually lighten, and they’ll be a blessing to be around. They’ll be someone you want to be friends with when they grow up.