DISCIPLINE FROM 4-12

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By the time a child reaches four years of age, the focus of discipline should not only be on his or her behavior, but also on the attitudes motivating it. The task of shaping this expression of the personality can be relatively simple or incredibly difficult, depending on the basic temperament of a particular child. Some youngsters are naturally warm and loving and trusting, while others sincerely believe the world is out to get them. Some enjoy giving and sharing, while their siblings may be selfish and demanding. Some smile throughout the day while others complain about everything from toothpaste to broccoli.

Furthermore, these attitudinal patterns are not consistent from one time to the next. They tend to alternate cyclically between rebellion and obedience. In other words, a time of intense conflict and defiance (if properly handled) gives way to a period of love and cooperation. Then when Mom and Dad relax and congratulate themselves for doing a super job of parenting, their little chameleon changes colors again.

Some might ask, “So what? Why should we be concerned about the attitudes of a boy or girl?” Indeed, there are many child-rearing specialists who suggest ignoring negative attitudes, including those that are unmistakably defiant in tone.

One advocate of this naive approach was Dr. Luther Woodward, whose recommendations are paraphrased in a book that is now thankfully out of print, Your Child from Two to Five. This was Dr. Woodward’s ill-considered advice:

What do you do when your preschooler calls you a ‘big stinker’ or threatens to flush you down the toilet? Do you scold, punish . . . or sensibly take it in stride?

Dr. Woodward recommended a positive policy of understanding as the best and fastest way to help a child outgrow this verbal violence. He wrote, “When parents fully realize that all little tots feel angry and destructive at times, they are better able to minimize these outbursts. Once the preschooler gets rid of his hostility, the desire to destroy is gone and instinctive feelings of love and affection have a chance to sprout and grow. Once the child is six or seven, parents can rightly let the child know that he is expected to be outgrowing sassing his parents.”
Dr. Woodward then warned his readers that the permissive advice he was offering would not be popular with onlookers. He wrote: “But this policy takes a broad perspective and a lot of composure, especially when friends and relatives voice disapproval and warn you that you are bringing up a brat.”

In this case, your friends and relatives would probably be right. This suggestion (published during the permissive 1950s and typical of other writings from that era) is based on the erroneous notion that children will develop sweet and loving attitudes if adults will permit and encourage their emotional outbursts and their sassiness during childhood. It didn’t work for Dr. Woodward’s generation, and it won’t be successful with your children. The child who has been calling his mother a big stinker (or worse) for six or seven years is unlikely to yield to parental leadership during the storms of adolescence. By then, the opportunity to shape the will of a strong-willed child is long gone, after which rebellious behavior will be a virtual certainty.

I expressed my divergent views on this subject in *The New Dare to Discipline* as follows:

“I believe that if it is desirable for children to be kind, appreciative and pleasant, those qualities should be taught—not hoped for.”

I believe that if it is desirable for children to be kind, appreciative and pleasant, those qualities should be taught—not hoped for. If we want to see honesty, truthfulness and unselfishness in our offspring, then these characteristics should be the conscious objectives of our early instructional process. If it is important to produce respectful, responsible young citizens, then we should set out to mold them accordingly. The point is obvious: Heredity does not equip a child with proper attitudes; children will learn what they are taught. We cannot expect the coveted behavior to appear magically if we have not done our early homework.

I fear that many parents today are failing to teach attitudes in their children that will lead to successful and responsible lives.

But how does one shape the attitudes of children? Most parents find it easier to deal with outright disobedience than with unpleasant characteristics of temperament or personality. Let me restate two age-old suggestions, and then I’ll offer a system that can be used with the especially disagreeable child.

1. **There is no substitute for parental modeling of the attitudes we wish to teach.** Someone wrote, “The footsteps a child follows are most likely to
be the ones his parents thought they covered up.” It is true. Our children are watching us carefully, and they instinctively imitate our behavior. Therefore, we can hardly expect them to be kind and giving if we are consistently grouchy and selfish. We will be unable to teach appreciativeness if we never say please or thank you at home or abroad. We will not produce honest children if we teach them to lie over the phone to someone trying to collect payment from us by saying, “Dad’s not home.” In these matters, our boys and girls quickly discern the gap between what we say and what we do. And of the two choices, they usually identify with our behavior and ignore our empty proclamations.

2. Most of the favorable attitudes that should be taught are actually extrapolations of the Judeo-Christian ethic, including honesty, respect, kindness, love, human dignity, obedience, responsibility, reverence, and so forth. And how are these time-honored principles conveyed to the next generation? The answer was provided by Moses in the words he wrote more than 3,000 years ago in the book of Deuteronomy: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

In other words, we can’t instill these attitudes during a brief, two-minute bedtime prayer or during formal training sessions. We must live them from morning to night. They should be reinforced during our casual conversation, being punctuated with illustrations, demonstrations, compliments and chastisement. Finally, let me suggest an approach for use with the strong-willed or negative child (age six or older) for whom other forms of instruction have been ineffective. I am referring specifically to the sour, complaining child who is making himself and the rest of his family miserable. The problem in disciplining such a child is the need to define the changes that are desired and then reinforce the improvements when they occur. Attitudes are abstractions that a six or eight year-old may not fully understand, and we need a system that will clarify the target in his mind.

Toward this end, I have developed an attitude chart that translates these subtle mannerisms into concrete, mathematical terms. Please note: The system that follows is not appropriate for the child who merely has a bad day or displays temporary unpleasantness associated with illness, fatigue, or environmental circumstances. Rather, it is a remedial tool to help change persistently negative and disrespectful attitudes by making the child conscious of her problem.
MY ATTITUDE CHART

NAME __________________________
DATE ___/___/_____

1 — EXCELLENT
2 — GOOD
3 — OKAY
4 — BAD
5 — TERRIBLE

MY ATTITUDE toward Mom

MY ATTITUDE toward Dad

MY ATTITUDE toward Sister/Brother

MY ATTITUDE toward Friends

MY ATTITUDE toward Work

MY ATTITUDE toward Bedtime

TOTAL POINTS __________

CONSEQUENCES

6-9 points = The family will do something fun together.
10-18 points = Nothing happens, good or bad.
19-20 points = I have to stay in my room for one hour.
21-22 points = I get one swat on my bottom.
23+ points = I get two swats on my bottom.
The attitude chart shown should be prepared and then reproduced, since a separate sheet will be needed each day. Place an X in the appropriate square for each category and then add the total points “earned” by bedtime. Although this nightly evaluation process has the appearance of being objective to the child, it’s obvious that the parents can influence the outcome by considering it in advance (it’s called cheating). Mom and Dad may want Michael or Rebecca to receive 18 points on the first night, barely missing the punishment but realizing he or she must stretch the following day. I must emphasize, however, that the system will fail miserably if a naughty child does not receive the punishment she deserves or if she hustles to improve but does not receive the family fun she was promised. This approach is nothing more than a method of applying reward and punishment to attitudes in a way that children can understand and remember.

I don’t expect everyone to appreciate this system or to apply it at home. In fact, parents of compliant, happy children will be puzzled as to why it would ever be needed. However, mothers and fathers of sullen, ill-tempered children will comprehend more quickly. Take it or leave it, as the situation warrants.

9 to 12 Years
Ideally, the foundation has been laid during the first nine years that will then permit a general loosening of the lines of authority. Every year that passes should bring fewer rules, less direct discipline and more independence for the child. This does not mean that a 10 year-old is suddenly emancipated; it does mean that she is permitted to make more decisions about her daily living than when she was six. It also means that she should be carrying more responsibility each year of her life.

Physical punishment should be relatively infrequent during this period immediately prior to adolescence. Studies show that corporal punishment loses its effectiveness after the age of 10 and should be discontinued. However, as is the case with all human beings, there are exceptions to the rules. Some strong-willed children absolutely demand to be spanked, and their wishes should be granted. However, compliant youngsters should have experienced their last round of corporal punishment by the end of their first decade (or even years earlier). Some never need it at all.
The overall objective during this final preadolescent period is to teach the child that his actions have inevitable consequences. One of the most serious casualties in a permissive society is the failure to connect those two factors: behavior and consequences. Too often, a three year-old child screams insults at her mother, but Mom stands blinking her eyes in confusion or simply ignores the behavior. A first-grader launches an attack on his teacher, but the school makes allowances for his age or is fearful of a lawsuit and takes no action. A 10 year-old is caught stealing candy in a store but is released with a reprimand. A 15 year-old sneaks the keys to the family car, but his father bails him out when he is arrested. A 17 year-old drives like a maniac, and her parents pay the higher insurance premiums after she wraps the family car around a telephone pole. You see, all through childhood some loving parents seem determined to intervene between behavior and consequences, breaking the connection and preventing the valuable learning that could have occurred.

Thus, it is possible for a young man or woman to enter adult life not really knowing that life can be harsh—that every move directly affects the future and that irresponsible behavior eventually produces sorrow and pain. One of the saddest sights is the adult who did not learn that behaviors have inevitable consequences and makes mistake after mistake that could easily have been avoided. Such a person applies for his first job and arrives late for work three times during the first week; then, when he is fired in a flurry of hot words, he becomes bitter and frustrated. It was the first time in his life that Mom and Dad couldn’t come running to rescue him from unpleasant circumstances. Or an individual gets married and has children but bounces from job to job trying to “find himself” while his family struggles financially. (Unfortunately, many parents still try to bail out their grown children even when they are in their 20s, and sometimes even their 30s.) What is the result? This overprotection produces emotional cripples who often develop lasting characteristics of dependency and a kind of perpetual adolescence.

How does one connect behavior with consequences? Parents must be willing to let children experience a reasonable amount of pain when they behave irresponsibly. When Craig misses the school bus through his own dawdling, let him walk a mile or two and enter school in midmorning (unless safety factors prohibit this). If Caitlin carelessly loses her lunch money, let her skip a meal. Obviously, it is possible to carry this principle too far, being harsh and inflexible with an immature child. But the best approach is to

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expect boys and girls to carry the responsibility that is appropriate for their age and occasionally to taste the bitter fruit that irresponsibility bears.

Let me offer an illustration that may be read to an 11 or 12 year-old child. The following story was published a few days after an eclipse of the sun had occurred:

Tipton, Ind. (UPI)—Ann Turner, 15, is living proof of the danger of trying to watch a solar eclipse with the naked eye. Now she is blind. On March 7, despite the warnings she had read, Ann “took a quick look through the window” at her home at the solar eclipse in progress.

“For some reason, I just kept staring out of the window,” she told Pat Cline, a reporter for the Tipton Daily Tribune. “I was fascinated by what was taking place in the sky.

“There was no pain or feeling of discomfort as I watched. I stood there perhaps four or five minutes when Mom caught me and made me turn away from the window.”

Ann said she “saw spots before my eyes but I didn’t think much about it.” Shortly afterward, she walked downtown and suddenly realized when she looked at a traffic signal that she could not read signs.

Frightened, Ann turned around and headed home. As she neared the porch, she said, she found she was “walking in darkness.”

She was too scared to tell her family until the next day, although she “had an intuition or suspicion that something terrible was happening.”

“I cried and cried,” she said. “I didn’t want to be blind. God knows I didn’t want to live in darkness the rest of my life.

“I kept hoping the nightmare would end and I could see again, but the darkness kept getting worse. I was scared. I had disobeyed my parents and the other warnings. I could not go back and change things. It was too late.”

When Mr. and Mrs. Coy Turner learned what had happened, they took Ann to specialists. But the doctors shook their heads and said they could not help Ann regain her sight.
They said she is 90 percent blind and can make out only faint lines of large objects on the periphery of what used to be her normal sight field.

With the help of a tutor, Ann is going ahead with her education. She is learning to adjust to the world of darkness.

After reading this dramatic story to your boy or girl, it might be wise to say, “This terrible thing happened to Ann because she didn’t believe what she was told by her parents and other adults. She trusted her own judgment instead. And the reason I read this to you is to help you understand that you might soon be in a situation that is similar to Ann’s. As you go into your teen years, you will have many opportunities to do some things that we have told you are harmful. For example, someone may try to convince you to take illegal drugs that seem harmless at the time but end up resulting in all sorts of health problems later on. Someone else, perhaps even a teacher, may tell you that it is okay for you to experiment sexually with someone as long as you do it ‘safely,’ and you may end up with a disease that will ravage your body and cause numerous problems for you and the person you eventually marry. Just like Ann, you may not realize the consequences until it is too late. That is why it will be so important for you to believe the warnings that you’ve been taught rather than to trust your own judgment. Many young people make mistakes during the teenage years that will affect the rest of their life, and I want to help you avoid those problems. But the truth of the matter is, only you can set your course and choose your pathway. You can accept what your eyes tell you, like Ann did, or you can believe what your mother and I have said, and more important, what we read in God’s Word. I have confidence that you will make the right decisions, and it’s going to be fun watching you grow up.”

There is so much that should be said about this late childhood era, but the limitations of time and space force me to move on. In conclusion, the period between 10 and 11 years of age often represents the final time of closeness and unpretentious love between parent and child until the child reaches young adulthood. Enjoy it to the maximum, for believe me, there are more tumultuous days coming!

I’ll end with a final illustration. I was once accompanied on a speaking trip by my wife, Shirley, requiring us to leave Danae and Ryan with
their grandparents for a full week. Shirley’s parents are dear people and loved our children very much. However, two bouncing, jumping, giggling little rascals can wear down the nerves of any adult, especially ones trying to enjoy their golden years. When we returned home from the trip, I asked my father-in-law how the children behaved and whether or not they caused him any problems. He replied in his North Dakota accent, “Oh no! Dere good kids. But the important thing is, you jus’ got to keep ‘em out in da open.”

That was probably the best disciplinary advice ever offered. Many behavioral problems can be prevented by simply avoiding the circumstances that create them. And especially for boys and girls growing up in congested cities, perhaps what we need most is to get ‘em “out in da open.” It’s not a bad idea.

Questions and Answers

Q: My five year-old is developing a problem with lying, and I don’t know how to handle it. What can I do to get him to tell the truth?

A. Lying is a problem every parent must deal with. All children distort the truth from time to time, and some become inveterate liars. Responding appropriately is a task that requires an understanding of child development and the characteristics of a particular individual. I’ll offer some general advice that will have to be modified to fit specific cases.

First, understand that a young child may or may not fully comprehend the difference between lies and the truth. There is a very thin line between fantasy and reality in the mind of a preschool boy or girl. So before you react in a heavy-handed manner, be sure you know what he understands and what his intent is.

For those children who are clearly lying to avoid unpleasant consequences or to gain an advantage of some sort, parents need to use that circumstance as a teachable moment. The greatest emphasis should be given to telling the truth in all situations. It is a virtue that should be taught—not just when a lie has occurred, but at other times as well. In your devotions with the children, read Proverbs 6:16-19 together: “There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.”
These are powerful verses around which to structure devotional periods with children. Explain who Solomon was, why his teachings are so important to us, and how Scripture helps us. It is like a flashlight on a dark night, guiding our footsteps and keeping us on the right path. It will even protect us while we are asleep, if we will bind it on our heart forever. Memorize Proverbs 6:16-19 together so it can be referred to in other contexts. Use it as a springboard to discussions of virtues and behavior that will please God. Each verse can be applied to everyday situations so that a child can begin to feel accountable for what he does and says.

Returning to the specific issue of lying, point out to the child that in a list of seven things the Lord hates most, two of them deal with dishonesty. Telling the truth is something God cares about, and, therefore, it should matter to us. This will explain why you are going to insist that your son or daughter learn to tell the truth even when it hurts to do so. Your goal is to lay a foundation that will help you underscore a commitment to honesty in the future.

The next time your child tells a blatant lie, you can return to this discussion and to the Scripture on which it was based. At some point, when you feel the maturity level of the youngster makes it appropriate, you should begin to insist that the truth be told and to impose mild punishment if it isn’t. Gradually over a period of years, you should be able to teach the virtue of truthfulness to your son or daughter.

Of course, you can undermine everything you’re trying to establish if you are dishonest in front of your kids. Believe me, they will note it and behave likewise. If Daddy can twist the truth, he’ll have little authority in preventing his kids from doing the same.

Q: I like your idea of balancing love with discipline, but I’m not sure I can do it. My parents were extremely rigid with us, and I’m determined not to make that mistake with my kids. But I don’t want to be a pushover, either. Can you give me some help in finding the middle ground between extremes?

A: Maybe it would clarify the overall goal of your discipline to state it in the negative. It is not to produce perfect kids. Even if you implement a flawless system of discipline at home, which no one in history has done, your children will still be children. At times they will be silly, lazy, selfish and, yes, disrespectful. Such is the nature of the human species. We as
adults have the same weaknesses. Furthermore, when it comes to kids, that’s the way they are wired. Boys and girls are like clocks; you have to let them run. My point is that the purpose of parental discipline is not to produce obedient little robots who can sit with their hands folded in the parlor thinking patriotic and noble thoughts! Even if we could pull that off, it wouldn’t be wise to try.

The objective, as I see it, is to take the raw material our babies arrive with on this earth and gradually mold it, shaping them into mature, responsible, God-fearing adults. It is a 20-year process that involves progress, setbacks, successes and failures. When the child turns 13, you’ll swear for a time that he’s missed everything you thought you had taught—manners, kindness, grace and style. But then maturity begins to take over, and the little green shoots from former plantings start to emerge. It is one of the richest experiences in life to watch that blossoming at the latter end of childhood.

Q: Isn’t it our goal to produce children with self-discipline and self-reliance? If so, how does your approach to external discipline imposed by parents get translated into internal control?

A: Many authorities suggest that parents take a passive approach to their children for the reason implied by your question: They want their kids to discipline themselves. But since young people lack the maturity to generate self-control, they stumble through childhood without experiencing either internal or external discipline. Thus, they enter adult life having never completed an unpleasant assignment or accepted an order they disliked or yielded to the leadership of their elders. Can we expect such a person to exercise self-discipline in young adulthood? I think not. That individual doesn’t even know the meaning of the word.

My belief is that parents should introduce their children to discipline and self-control by any reasonable means available, including the use of external influences, when they are young. By being required to behave responsibly, children gain valuable experience in controlling their impulses and resources. Year by year, responsibility is gradually transferred from the shoulders of the parents directly to the children. Eventually, they will act on what they learned in their earlier years—on their own initiative.

To illustrate, children should be required to keep their room relatively neat when they are young. Then somewhere during the mid-teens, their own self-
discipline should take over and provide the motivation to continue the task. If it does not, the parents should close the door and let them live in a dump, if that is their choice.

In short, self-discipline does not come automatically to those who have never experienced it. Self-control must be learned, and it must be taught.

Notes

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