

Web-Based Radio Show

Discipline


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Good morning and thank you for joining us. Today we're going to do a show on a topic that we get lots of questions about – it may be one of the most frequently asked-about topics of all – and that is discipline. Most parents – parents of children with special needs or parents of children who don't have any challenges – are all concerned about the best ways to discipline, whether it's their toddlers knocking over things or being negative; their preschoolers taking another child's toys; an eight-year-old who's disruptive in school; a teenager who's skipping school; or an older teenager who's into drugs – all parents are concerned with this single word: discipline. How do I set limits? How do I discipline my kids?

If we go back, historically, we know that there's been an ebb and a flow between trends of permissiveness and hopes that love alone will “cure the savage beast” in us all, and that's vacillated with firm toughness, and even punitiveness and even things that we now consider to be abusive, such as hitting children with belts or spanking that could be very, very painful. Today, in different cultures and even in different areas of the United States, there are different philosophies of these different disciplines. Many credit Dr. Spock, the famous pediatrician that millions and millions and millions of parents around the world have followed as he wrote his book on child care, with shifting the focus from a more punitive approach to one that is characterized by more permissiveness, I would say, or trying to use love and guidance rather than toughness.

In today's culture we see all these movements and all these elements – the tough love movement takes the position that you need to be tougher. A teenager who is on drugs might be told not to come back home until he cleans himself up and the door is closed to him, so he's left to go on the streets. Mental health professionals used to call this letting someone “bottom out.” It's a gamble. You're tossing the dice with your own child because some children, with this approach, can wind up with the wrong group of people and their condition can worsen and they can deteriorate and wind up in a hospital, with some of them escalating their drug use and becoming involved not only in



dangerous behaviors, but also developing more serious and more complicated mental health problems. One must be cautious about this approach.


On the other hand, complete permissiveness doesn't provide definition for a child, doesn't provide boundaries that a child needs because children need guidance and boundaries. For example, a four-year-old who's taking other children's toys, who's pushing other children, who's hitting Mom and Dad when they say something that he doesn't like, such as, "You can't go outside and play in the rain" or "You can't have this toy," if he's not disciplined in a way that sets firm boundaries – is a child who's going to be "spoiled" – very self-indulgent, self-involved, and have a hard time with peers and probably school work, as it comes up, and in other areas where they have to become "disciplined."

The goal of discipline is to help children develop internal discipline and internal judgment so they can guide themselves so at some age you don't have to be setting external restraints or external limits, but you can foster a child's internal sense of "I can control and regulate myself and reach my goals and I'm a disciplined person" as an older person who can have fun and enjoy themselves and challenge the rules occasionally when they feel they don't make sense, but not to the degree where we're getting into "hot water."

So, what is the proper approach to discipline, with children with special needs and with children who are developing without any special challenges? I'm going to provide some general principles first, and then concretize these with a little more detail in terms of the approaches and comment on approaches, such as "time out."


First, in terms of general goals of discipline, the general goal of discipline, as just indicated, is to help the child develop internal discipline where he can guide himself and develop a sense of judgment. We can't hope for that to begin occurring until they're four or five years old and, hopefully, it keeps getting more complex as they move through their school years and into their adolescent years, where it becomes especially important as they grow bigger and stronger and more independent. They need judgment, they need to be able to be reflective about their choices, and they need that internal compass – that internal discipline – to guide them. So that's one general goal of discipline.

Another goal of discipline is to be able to deal with immediate situations, such as when a child is throwing a tantrum when Grandma's over, or when relatives are over and parents are embarrassed, or when the family is out at a restaurant, parents need to know what to do on the spot. So, discipline helps us simply manage a child's expectable



experimentation with the limits as they're growing up – whether it's a two-year-old or a four-year-old or a six-year-old or an eight-year-old.


A third goal of discipline is actually a little more elusive, but it's to develop a sense of self. If every need is expected to be met or if all you experience are just punitive actions with hitting and spanking and isolation, this is going to affect your self-image – how you view yourself – and it's going to affect the very definition of boundaries and of having a clear sense of where I end and someone else begins. The child whose expectations are never confronted with limits doesn't develop a separation of where he ends and the rest of the world begins. This child expects the world to be part of him. Mom and Dad don't have needs; only he has needs. Siblings don't have needs; only he has needs; but this affects his boundaries, his definition of his own personhood, in a sense, because part of this definition and a clear sense of self comes from knowing that there's a me interacting with a you, a non-me. This normally occurs throughout early childhood, but in the first three to four to five years of life, first pre-verbally, through back-and-forth interactions and then verbally, through back-and-forth interactions and through play – imaginative play – through back-and-forth interactions where the child is constantly experimenting with the “me,” the “I,” the “self,” doing things to the other and getting feedback and getting reactions, part of which are reactions to the different feelings. If love is greeted with a hug back, there's a “me” loving you getting a hug back, and a “you” loving me. If aggression is met with limits, there's an angry “me” getting a limit-setting response from a “you.” But if one of these feelings – love or aggression or others – doesn't get any feedback, it's hard for the child to develop a sense of self in that area. So the child may have a good picture of himself as a loving self, but not know where he begins and ends when it comes to anger. That can lead to fears and anxieties. Ironically, the lack of a response and a lack of limits may leave a child to be scared of anger and scared that anger can be too destructive because there's no feedback early in life. If the feedback is overly punitive it can lead to a child who's too scared to be assertive and his sense of an assertive sense of self is compromised. So another broad goal of discipline is to help define a sense of self, a sense of where we begin and end and where someone else begins and ends. We do this with all our different emotions and, typically, we do it during the early years of life – we develop this sense of self through lots of back-and-forth interactions, which we call emotional signaling, for all the different emotional realms of life: love, curiosity, assertiveness, anger, anxieties, etc. We should amplify that when we talk about a developing sense of self, we're also talking about how to live in a society. To live in any culture which has rules and norms, one needs that internal discipline. So another part of discipline is to be able to participate in one's peer



group and one's culture and one's society, whether it's a child's society at school or adult society of rules and regulations and adult behavior, discipline is very important for that.

Now, what are the different methods? We know there are extremes; you can be overly punitive or you can be overly permissive. What are some techniques that are very, very helpful? Well, here are a few basic principles of all techniques. One is, and this is a hard one for most parents – whether it's a parent of a child with special needs or a child without special needs, and we'll come back to that issue in a moment – one issue that's especially hard for all parents is the notion that you earn the privilege to discipline your child. Discipline is not something you should think of as being bestowed upon you simply by virtue of being a parent. It's something you earn the right to have, and you earn that right by providing enough nurturance and warmth and love and compassion and logical Floortime, where you're marching to the beat of your child's drummer so that your child really feels you're part of their universe, part of their life. With the child with special needs this can be a little more challenging because they may rebuff you or may have special sensitivities which make it hard so you have to adapt to your child's pattern and rhythm. The child needs to feel secure and confident that you're there, that you're in their corner and you're spending enough time with them. So if two parents are working full time and they come home in the evening and they're only giving some cursory time to their child, it's going to be hard for the child to get that sense of security. A child who's in daycare 50 hours a week in a large group won't be getting that from Mom and Dad at home, and that's going to be difficult. So the child needs to feel that security of being cared for and being loved. One of the ways to help the child feel secure is through Floortime activities, where you follow the child's lead in play and interaction and tailor your interactions to your child's personality and have fun together – that leads a child to want to please you. They want your admiration; they want your respect, particularly as they come to understand the difference between an admiring, approving look and a negative look. That occurs, interestingly, between 12 and 24 months of life; it's not something you have to wait to have until the child is four years old. They understand that before they have words. So the child you've earned the right to discipline is a child who will want to please you. They will feel bad when you give them a dirty look; they will feel bad when they have to be punished with a time out. So that's principle one – you earn the right, and that's a hard one, particularly for very busy parents who don't want to be confronted with that.


The second general principle is that discipline has to be tailored to the child's personality, to their profile. For example, if a child is overly sensitive to things like sound and touch and is generally an oversensitive child, discipline has to be much gentler. If a



child is what we call sensory craving and is on the move all the time or rambunctious or “thick-skinned,” or a daredevil, discipline has to be persistent and firmer – not punitive – but firmer and probably the child needs a little louder voice than the overly sensitive child who, as one could say, might be “blown out of the water” with something that’s too loud on your part in setting discipline. So you have to tailor it to the child.

Number three, you want to always educate the child, not during the moment of discipline, necessarily, but right after the child has settled down and is calm. If it’s a verbal child, make sure he understands the reason for the discipline and make sure those conversations are two-way conversations, where the child gives his point of view and you can give your point of view. At the end of the day it may be that your point of view persists and prevails because you’re bigger and older and wiser, and the child will have to accept that, but you’re interested in the child’s point of view and he wants your empathy and understanding, even though you may prevail. So it’s not a lecture format; it’s a discussion where you’re listening to the child’s perspective.


So we want discipline to have those elements in it. Now, we’ve talked about the first element – earning the privilege through spending lots of time with the child and doing what I call Floortime activities, joining the child in his world and making him feel that you march to the beat of his drummer. Number two is to tailor the discipline to the child. We’ve identified a number of different types of children in terms of their profiles. For example, we may have a child who’s hypersensitive to sound and touch. He may have some areas where he’s sensory craving, where he moves around a lot, so he may have a mixed pattern, but every child tends to have a predominant pattern. It’s very mild in typically developing kids, and often there are some that are more extreme in children with special needs. So, in general terms, for a child who’s overly reactive and overly sensitive the discipline method needs to be very gentle, persistent, and firm; you don’t want to throw fuel on the fire when the child’s already scared by being loud and too tough. You want to use persistence. So the time out method, sitting together, interrupting a favorite activity, losing privileges, charts with stars and minuses where they lose and gain privileges are all equally good methods and they can be used in combination. Or you could possibly use positive incentives, so you can have negatives like losing stars and having to interrupt your favorite activity for a few minutes, but you can also have positives where the child earns special activities or special time with the parent. You don’t want to isolate the child, so if it’s a time out it should be sitting, but in a place where they can see Mom or Dad or siblings, but you show you mean business. You sometimes need to tolerate a tantrum or a little crying or a bit of your child being upset, and if you’re too sensitive yourself, have your spouse be the “police force” while you



work, yourself, on it. If a child has special needs and is also overly reactive, overly sensitive, tailor the discipline method to the child's language level and level of understanding. It might be a four-year-old child who's got a two-year-old level of language or a two-year-old level of overall intellectual development. So you would discipline this child the same way you would a two-year-old – a time out, the interruption of a favorite activity – you wouldn't expect the child, necessarily, to be able to engage in a long and lengthy conversation with you afterward. That would be a very good method – you wouldn't want to isolate the child, certainly.

If it's a child, again, who's sensory craving, on the move and rambunctious, there the discipline has to take two forms. One, you have to be providing alternative ways for the child to be able to use all that energy, all that need for movement, so you have to have lots of constructive ways to meet their sensory craving needs. This could be sports or athletics for an older child; it could be just games with lots of movement and obstacle courses and planning and challenging the child for the younger child, for the toddler or the preschooler. So provide lots of opportunities for physical exercise that's fun for the child and lots of regulating exercises, like what I call the "slow-fast" game where you go fast, you go slow, you go super-slow; play the drums loud, soft, super-soft; talk loud, soft, super-soft so the child is learning to regulate. There, again, if a parent imposes a time out from a favorite activity the child may jump up out of the chair, so you may have to be in a room together where you sit together. The door is locked, the child's not alone, so the child can't run back to the activity and the child and you work out together for 10 or 15 minutes, whatever the interruption is, until he gets the idea that you're the boss. You may need to have two of you in there so the child feels secure that they can't just run rough shod over you. Like a stallion that's full of energy, it may take a more talented rider to help this child feel secure, so he realizes that you and he together can limit himself. This is very, very important, but you've got to be there as part of the child's life and you have to be firmer and sometimes more persistent for longer periods of time until the child gets the idea, couple with lots of opportunities for constructive actions that give a child alternative ways of using that energy and that need for sensory support.

For the child who has motor planning problems, in other words who can do one-step actions but not five-step actions, they may have trouble with discipline so there, if they're overly sensitive also, you may need to be persistent; if they're sensory craving, this is what I've just been talking about, but there you might want to combine it with improving their motor planning – lots of obstacle courses, lots of games where there's high motivation – like a treasure hunt game, but they have to increase their planning of actions from one step to two steps to three steps. So if an obstacle course just starts off




with a simple one, then it gets a little more complex and then a little more complex. If it's a treasure hunt game, there's one clue at first and then they find the hidden treasure. Then there are two clues, then there are three clues and they have to follow the actions of the three clues. That helps them sequence and plan, which ultimately will help them discipline themselves, so when you say "Clean up your toys," they can take the three or four steps necessary to clean up their toys.

Another principle that's good for all children is to work with the child. If the discipline is based on the child's not doing things they should be doing, like cleaning up their toys or putting their things away or helping set the table, with an older child, start off doing it together as a team, because sometimes a child doesn't do it because of insecurities or anxieties; so, use a team approach to it. Then slowly encourage the child to do it more and more independently and be gradual in your approach.

These are some of the principles that I recommend you apply to discipline. Earn the privilege, tailor it to the child's profile, and do some things together that require constructive action. For the child with special needs, help the child move forward in development, like improving their motor planning or improving their language skills or improving their interactive skills with others because this gives the child more and more incentive and more and more tools to use. Also, help the child who has special needs, who gets dysregulated very easily, who does need to control themselves, learn internal regulation. So there's an overriding principle for all children – always calm and soothe and help the child calm down first. In other words, don't discipline him in the middle of a tantrum. If it's in a restaurant, just go out together to the car, to a quiet place. Find a quiet place, soothe and calm him doing whatever works for the child: if it's holding or firm pressure on the back, use that; if it's just being quiet together, use that method. Calm first, and then after the child has calmed down, discuss a little bit what just happened and then if the child has crossed the line and you feel discipline is in order, administer the discipline. If you're away in the supermarket or a restaurant, you may want to wait until the child gets home until you discuss the discipline and you can say, "Let's go over what happened at the restaurant. Now we have to have a time out or an interruption from your favorite TV show or your favorite toy," etc.

Some no-no's: The tough love approach is an extreme; generally, I believe it's too risky and often is not combined enough with that first principle of earning the privilege or earning the right and long-term I think it can often have negative consequences. It's based on an older version of the notion that parents are entitled to get their children's respect and love and admiration, but I haven't seen it work that way. The children often harbor resentment and it affects their personalities. So avoid the extreme, tough-love



approach. Avoid isolation or rejection. A child who needs more discipline often is already feeling rejected and resentful and angry. Instead, earn the privilege, earn the right; make sure you're doing enough Floortime type interaction or "hang-out" type interaction with your child, but combine it with firm limits. Use persistence rather than punitiveness and use understanding with persistence and firmness. When you feel you're losing it, yourself, because you're only human, take a time out for yourself – relax, take a deep breath, have your spouse spell you, if you're fortunate to have a spouse at home. If not, just take a time out and wait and come back to it later.

These are some general principles of discipline. I hope they're helpful. We'll talk more about it in the future.

Thank you.