

Why Discipline Doesn't Work



“My child just doesn’t listen to me,” a parent tells me. “No matter what I say, I may as well be talking to the wall. Homework is a nightmare, chores are a constant battle, everything is a struggle.”

“What did you do the last time you were caught up in a struggle?” I ask.

“First I yelled at her. Then I threatened to take away some of her privileges.”

“Give me an example.”

“Instead of doing her homework, she was playing games on her computer all evening long. So I took her phone away for two weeks.”

“What happened then?”

“All hell broke loose. She yelled at me, saying she hated me and never wanted to talk to me again. She wasted another two hours crying in her room. I’m running out of things to take away from her. Nothing makes a difference!”

Does this sound familiar?

Which parent hasn’t threatened their children at some point? If they are mouthy with us, we take away television

time. If they roll their eyes, we cancel their play date. If they don't do well on an exam, we deny them a trip we promised them to Disney World. If they don't clean their room, we take away their iPod. Caught in a cycle of *If you don't _____, then I will _____*, we exhaust ourselves trying to control our children.

Most parents find themselves in an endless system of bartering with their children. I call it the “prisoner-warden” approach to parenting, in which the warden is required to closely monitor the child's actions. The child, in the role of prisoner, does something right or wrong. The parent, acting the part of the warden, swoops in to dish out either a reward or a punishment. The prisoner soon becomes dependent on the warden's control to regulate their behavior.

This system of rewards and punishments undercuts the child's capacity to learn self-discipline, subverting their inherent potential for self-regulation. Becoming a mere puppet whose performance is entirely dependent on the warden, the child learns to be externally motivated rather than internally directed. As the years pass, it becomes unclear who the warden is and who the prisoner is, as both torment each other in endless cycles of manipulation.

It isn't a happy situation for any parent to be in the role of warden. I ask parents if they like this role, to which they vehemently answer, “Absolutely not.” Yet when I point out how they are in fact playing this role and suggest they stop, they look at me as if I had two heads.

I say to them, “Disciplining your child by taking away their phone, or by yelling, grounding, or slapping them, only perpetuates the problem instead of resolving it. You are seeing the evidence right before your eyes that *discipline*

doesn't work. If it did, your child wouldn't still be engaging in this behavior.”

Is there anyone who doesn't believe we have to discipline our children? I believed in discipline for years. I yelled, tried time outs, and threatened. I believed it was what was required of me as a parent. No wonder then that when I suggest to parents that discipline isn't only unnecessary, but actually feeds the negative behavior they are trying to correct, it's as if I had asked them to give up a birthright.

“What do you mean?” parents demand indignantly. “How can I not discipline my child? They won't do anything if I don't scare them or punish them.” Hearing the almost panicked tone of these parents, I realize how entrenched most of us are in our belief that discipline is a cornerstone of parenting. I also see the repercussions of this approach to parenting, in that the child truly won't do anything without being threatened or bribed because they have become addicted to being constantly controlled.

When we engage with our children from the belief that child discipline is a vital aspect of our role as parents, we assume children are inherently undisciplined and need to be civilized. Ironically, the most heavily disciplined children are often those least able to control *themselves*.

Without ever really thinking it through, we've bought

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into the belief that without discipline, children run wild. We interpret all their misbehavior through this lens. I'm suggesting just the opposite. What we think of as "discipline" is detrimental and fails to produce the kind of behavior parents so long for in their children.

Originally the word "discipline" had a benign meaning, associated with education and training. But ask any parent today about discipline and they assume you are talking about a strategy to control a child's behavior—a strategy that revolves around the parent exerting their will over the child.

Parents actually ponder the question, "What can I take away from my child that my child particularly enjoys, so they'll get the message?" It doesn't occur to them to ask whether the thing being taken away is in any way related to the behavior. The parent believes that depriving their child of this particularly treasured item or privilege will jolt the child into paying attention.

To see how nonsensical this approach is, let's translate it to an adult level. After you have agreed to go on a diet, your spouse catches you cheating with a bag of donuts, and takes away your car keys to prevent you going to the donut shop again. Now, how do you feel? Or you are late for a lunch date with a friend, so your friend demands you give her your favorite piece of jewelry. Again, how do you feel?

I think we can agree that such actions are counterproductive to developing a good marriage or a strong friendship, let alone to keeping you away from donuts or being tardy again. Well, much of what we call "discipline" is just as nonsensical to our children—and just as deeply resented.

Ask yourself, what's the connection between:

If you lose weight, we can go to Universal Studios

If you make the swim team, you can have a sleepover with your friends

If you get an A grade, you can go with grandma to the movie

If you don't do your homework right now, I am not buying you new shoes

If you don't speak to me politely, I'll take away your phone

If you don't stop lying to me, you will be grounded for three weeks.

Parents admit to me, "I find myself making threats without even thinking about it. I feel so angry, they just fly out of my mouth. Then once I make them, I have to follow through, or my child will think I don't mean what I say—and then all hell will break loose."

I respond, "Maybe things improve for the moment. But by using this approach, has the situation been permanently changed?"

Every parent of whom I ask this question admits, "No, never." As one person confided, "I hit that wall when my oldest was four. I thought, 'It can't have to be this way. Human beings, kids, are good!' She is now eleven, and she has never seen, nor heard, nor experienced blackmail, threats, or punishment." The fact is, this heavy-handed, dominance-based approach achieves nothing positive. Indeed, research has

verified that punitive techniques carry long-lasting detrimental consequences.

Whenever I talk about this a parent will say to me, “But I was disciplined. In fact, my father walloped the life out of me—and I turned out fine.”

I don’t get into a debate about whether the parent is truly “fine.” I’ve learned that such a debate fails to get to the heart of the matter. Instead I ask, “How did you *feel* when you were being punished or beaten as a child?”

If the parent is honest, they then say something like: I hated it, I cried a lot, It terrified me, I hated myself, I just wanted to run away.

I ask the parent, “So why do you discipline?”

Predictably the answer is, “Because I want my children to learn. How will they learn if I don’t teach them?”

If our aim is to teach a child, I’ve already hinted that discipline is the *enemy* of teaching. Contrary to what almost everyone believes, far from being synonymous, discipline and teaching are worlds apart.

To illustrate this, think back to how you felt when you were sent to your room, your favorite television program was turned off, you were grounded so you couldn’t see your friends, your phone was taken from you, you were yelled at, or you were spanked. Did you feel good? Did it become natural for you to do what it intended to teach you? No, what you learned is, “My parents are the boss, so don’t piss them off.” You likely also learned that your parents treat other adults, work associates, and maybe even pets with more respect than you.

Because discipline seems related to their parent’s whims rather than something reasonable, it always triggers

resentment in children. Though they may comply with our demands because we force them to do so, internally they develop a resistance not only to what we are asking of them, but even more so to us as the messenger. Their resistance, or at best half-heartedness, intensifies the parental need to control, as the parent bears down on the child, believing the stricter they are the more the child will comply. It's this resistance that becomes emotional plaque, creating barriers to learning, growth, and—most of all—connection between the parent and child.

The child's behavior may fall in line, but their heart doesn't. There's no buy-in on our children's part.

A World that Majors in Control



The mother was having an epic meltdown, the worst it had ever gotten. Words slung, feet stomped, doors banged. She felt like screaming. Or running away. Why couldn't her daughter just do as she was *told*? The child was impossible.

It was always the same—toys left out everywhere. Hadn't she told her daughter to pick them up an hour ago, and several times since? But *still* it wasn't done—and their dinner guests were arriving in only fifteen minutes. With so much to do in the kitchen, and now on top of everything the living room to tidy, the mother was about to lose her mind. Snatching up toys and angrily tossing them in the toy box she yelled, "You bad girl! Why don't you ever listen? Why do you always have to be so difficult?"

The four-year-old watched her mother flail her arms and make scary faces. She saw her bang things and talk like she was really, really mad. She heard big words: "responsibility," "punishment," "discipline." What did they mean? She didn't know. She was just plain scared. So scared that she felt like peeing right there on the spot. But that would make Mommy

even angrier, so she kept talking to the urge in her head: “Pee pee don’t. Pee pee stay. One, two, three.”

When would Mommy become happy Mommy again? When would the clouds go away? The little girl hated when the clouds came. They always seemed to come lately—and it was all her fault.

Do you see yourself in this mother? I see myself because the mother was me, and my daughter was the child.

Or was it that *I* was the child?

Mix together a busy schedule, a daughter whose agenda was different from my own, guests about to arrive, coupled with a need on my part to control everything, and all it took was one more thing to set me off. I would blow, venting at my daughter, blaming her for the stress I was feeling. If she chose to be defiant, all bets were off. After all, wasn’t it my right as a parent to discipline her, even my duty?

Much as I told myself my daughter “deserved” to be punished, I knew my reaction to toys all over the floor was out of proportion and had more to do with my need to control than with her actions. So I felt bad for exploding at her and promised myself I wouldn’t get so angry with her again. Until the next time she did something to set me off, that is, and then I couldn’t help myself.

Again and again, if my child appeared out of my control, *I* went out of control. I would feel my chest becoming tight, my throat constricted, my jaw clenched, as in seconds I morphed from a kind mommy into a raging tyrant.

Before I became a parent, I would never have thought myself capable of such outbursts. One minute infuriated, the next nauseated by the way I had inflicted so much pain on my child, I was confounded by my anger.

As a psychologist and therapist I find that, like me, my clients tend to become hooked on control. If anything goes wrong or we are pushed just a little too far, we lose our balance. Of course, afterward we're always sorry and perhaps downright embarrassed by our anger, power plays, and guilt tripping. Yet when our children don't do what we need them to do, we don't know any other way to spur them to action. It's like getting your emotions caught in a blender with no control over the speed dial.

When I experienced a loss of control in this way, it was as if I'd taken a time capsule back to my own childhood. I was suddenly four years old again, stomping my feet, pitching a fit, desperate to get my way. The reason I was triggered in such an intense way with my daughter is that the present situation was reawakening emotions from my past. I have vivid memories of occasions in my own childhood when guests were coming to dinner and my mother was in a state of total panic. Even though I resented how controlling she became at such times, I internalized her feelings. Lurking just beneath the surface of my civilized veneer, these emotions now sprang to life with my own daughter, subverting my sanity and hijacking all reason.

The patterns of behavior we witness in childhood become the template for our own way of parenting. How our parents made us feel lingers in us unresolved, becoming the lens through which we interpret our children's behavior. In other words, much of how we interact with our children is governed by what's often referred to as our "subconscious."

To some degree we are all slaves to our past, and our children have a way of bringing this out. It's because, even if the precise events that imprinted us appear forgotten, they still

drive us at a subconscious level until we face them and resolve the emotions surrounding them. It's no wonder that, in my practice as a therapist, I frequently encounter men and women in their forties, fifties, and sixties who are still emotionally trapped in childhood, unable to escape the echo of their parents' rage, put-downs, neglect, and control.

Every conflict in our present lives—whether with our children, spouse, or other adults—is in some way a recreation of our childhood. Every relationship, every interaction is based on a blueprint from our own upbringing. In one sense, then, there are no adults in the room; we are all just children acting out. When it comes to parenting, we are in many ways *children raising children*.

Janet is an example of what I'm describing. Things became so bad between her and her ten-year-old son that, every time he entered the room, she found herself tensing up, dreading the conflict she knew was almost certain to follow. Tracing this feeling back in therapy, she realized she was experiencing the same helplessness she used to feel around her father, who regularly beat her. All these years later, her son's "all boy" boisterous energy, which was at times quite aggressive, was triggering her unresolved past.

Without realizing it, Janet was reacting to her son as if he were her father, which is why she was immediately on the defensive around him. Their almost daily fights only served to cement her belief that her son was a tyrant—an image of

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males that had more to do with her father than with her son. In other words, a pattern of behavior established decades ago with her own parents was now in the driver's seat when it came to how she parented.

Children who are dominated grow up either to dominate or be dominated. This is why for generations a belief in the parent's right to dominate and control has prevailed—especially a father's right to “decide” for the family, a phenomenon often referred to as “patriarchy.”

As one client in her forties related, “When I was a young girl, my mother would sometimes say, ‘Your father is Lord and Master of the house.’ My brother and I believed her. My father's angry look ensured compliance with the way he said things should be. A child's smooth cheek needn't be struck many times for the message to get through. Even my father's clenched jaw became enough to bring me into line. Another favorite maxim in our home was the familiar ‘children should be seen and not heard.’ For me, the parent-child relationship was clear: obey or else. My preference in any situation wasn't on anyone's radar screen, including my own. In retrospect, I can see I've lived most of my life unaware I had a choice in anything. Blaming someone or something ‘out there’ became as reflexive as breathing.”

Generations the world over have subscribed to an approach to parenting which states that, by reason of age and experience, the parent is at the top of a pyramid and the child by default at the bottom. The idea is that children should fit into the parent's world, not the other way around.

I often hear people say, “They are my children, and I'll decide what's good for them.” Many believe that, because we brought our children into the world, we own them. It's as if

they were one of our possessions. This mistaken notion feeds our belief that we have a right to dictate to them. Based on this flawed idea, we justify coercion, manipulation, and even physical punishment. Of course, we couch it as “teaching” and create a philosophy called punitive “discipline,” coming up with fancy strategies, techniques, and gimmicks. Volumes are written on the subject. Yet if we are courageous enough to admit it, all forms of “discipline” are just temper tantrums in disguise. Did you ever think of much of what we call “discipline” as nothing more than an adult child pitching a fit?

Unless we realize the entire premise of heavy-handed punitive discipline is based on our delusion of superiority over our children, the daily struggles with behavior that play out in our homes, in the classroom, on the playground, and in the conflicts of the wider world will continue unabated. Indeed, this authoritarian approach to parenting is largely responsible for the world as we know it—whether we are talking about a woman in midlife who has never followed her own voice because her father insisted he was “in charge,” dictatorships that tyrannize their subjects, or nations that seek to subjugate other nations in international conflict. The root of the dysfunction we experience as individuals, nations, and a world lies in the belief that people need to be controlled—a belief that, no matter which culture or part of the world we come from, pervades our parenting. The need to dominate is what discipline is all about, and this domination is responsible for much of the emotional distress that has characterized our species for eons.

If you look at most of the supposedly “great” men of the past, they were in many cases tyrants who sought to conquer. Their “greatness” was achieved through control, at the

expense of those they subjugated. Whether we are talking about individuals such as Alexander the Great or Napoleon, or empires such as Rome or the British Empire, they were driven by a need to dominate and control.

Just as most of the world evaluates “greatness” in terms of how much control a leader achieves, so too “good” citizens—like “good” children—are those who comply. And who are the most compliant of all citizens? Aren’t they the military, which functions entirely on orders and prizes discipline above all else? Uniform behavior is the gold standard in a world that majors in discipline.

In contrast, once in a while a leader arises on the world scene who dramatically improves the wellbeing of other humans. Though such leaders have been few and far between during the course of history, who of us wouldn’t want our child to grow up to be a truly good leader—maybe even a great leader who fosters peace, prosperity, and wellbeing? Who of us doesn’t want our child to grow up to be a freethinker, a trailblazer, original and innovative? Who of us doesn’t want our child to be true to who they really are instead of docile, easily manipulated, and controlled by others?

We say we want these things for our children, yet our addiction to discipline sabotages the very goals we set for them. A diet of control, compliance, and conformity guarantees either mediocrity and an acceptance of the mundane, or dictatorship and tyranny.

Some parts of our world have in many ways moved beyond the Dark Ages, through the Renaissance, and into a more enlightened era. We don’t put people in the stocks anymore, don’t burn them at the stake because they have different religious beliefs from us, and for the most part don’t believe

that sickness is a punishment from God. Ours is a far less hierarchical, more democratic era than has existed on the planet until now.

Though there is an increasing awareness of the importance of valuing human beings and treating them fairly, together with a growing consciousness of the importance of caring for the planet, when it comes to raising our children most of us are sadly still stuck in the Dark Ages. Through being disciplined, children the world over are daily discriminated against, often horrifically and with tragic results.

It's therefore time to change the entire paradigm of parenting, at the core of which is the flawed idea of authoritarian discipline—that is, “lording it over” our children heavy handedly, instead of working with them in a constructive manner that encourages them to become self-disciplined.