



Helping Parents Understand Discipline

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Do you have balance between rules and the relationship?

It's not easy to correct our kids when they mess up. Even if we are clearly in the right, the second we discipline our kids, our popularity points suffer. Mom isn't so cool anymore when she enforces, "No mobile phone at the table."



Sadly, some parents can't handle this rejection, so they become the "yes" parent, the "peerant" and let their kids do whatever they want. These kids spiral out of control and, ironically, usually resent mom and dad years later for not caring. Other parents, striving hard not to become the overly-permissive parent, go the polar opposite route and raise their kids like they're in military school. Discipline is celebrated, nurturing is stifled, and the relationship between parent and child also suffers.

So where is the balance between rules and the relationship? How can parents carry out consequences while demonstrating unmistakable love?

Here are four simple tips for loving our kids enough to enforce consequences when our kids push the limits:

1. Delay Punishment

This is by far one of the most effective discipline tools... waiting. It's like this. When our kids break a rule, don't punish them that very second. Address the issue immediately, but make them wait for the punishment. This brilliant move achieves two desired results:

A. It gives parents a time to cool off! Many of us need this "cool-off" period. In the initial moment, a parent's anger is usually too apparent, and words are spoken that are difficult to erase hours later when cooler heads prevail.

B. This “delay” is punishment in itself. Instead of just getting it over with, tell them (calmly, if possible), “Well, I really don’t know exactly what I’m going to do yet. Just leave your phone right there on my dresser, and we’ll talk in a few hours about what’s going to happen!” Kids hate this, and it forces them to think about their choices and possible consequences while they wait.

But eventually you have to come up with a consequence. So when you do...

2. Make the Consequence Match the Violation

Don’t think up random consequences. When at all possibly, use natural consequences, or consequences that match the infraction. “You went the lazy route and got bad grades? You pay the \$30 increase in your insurance because you lost the ‘good grades’ discount.” “You forgot to take the dog out? Get the shop vac and clean up the pee.” Let them experience the pain of real world consequences. We aren’t helping them if we constantly swoop down and save them from real life problems.

Children who are constantly “saved” are the ones who grow into teens who believe nothing is ever their fault. It’s always the stupid teacher, coach, advisor, driver, friend... and yes, parent. Why expect them to take responsibility when they’ve never had to.

So try your best to use consequences that embrace the natural consequences of the situation. Ask your kids what natural consequences might result in these scenarios, or even...

3. Ask Them to Set Their Own Consequences

When our kids violate a rule or guardrail, ask them what they think an appropriate punishment would be.

I’ve done this at times because my wife and I honestly couldn’t think of anything. Funny, our kids usually come up with something really good. Just put on your best poker face and agree, “Excellent thinking. What do you think this consequence will teach you?” This gives our kids a chance to dialogue with us about what they learned, which leads to my next tip...

4. Look for Teaching Moments

Far more important than any punishment is the conversation you have about the punishment. Yes, this is living out Deuteronomy 6 and talking with our kids about our values as we get up, as we walk along the road, as we go to bed at night.

Sometimes our kids won't even realize the danger they're flirting with on their phones and computers. Whenever you encounter a story in the news about a kid making poor decisions, bring it up at dinner, and— don't lecture— just ask questions. "Why do you think this girl got into this situation?" "How might she have avoided this in the first place?"

Parents can do the same with a pause button on their remote control when they see one of these teachable moments while watching TV or a movie.

There have been times where our kids have messed up pretty bad and brought natural consequences upon themselves. At times like this, we often just say something like this: "It seems like you're already facing some pretty nasty natural consequences. I probably don't need to add any more into the mix, don't you think?" Your kids probably won't disagree with this. So propose, "Just tell me what you've learned from this situation and what you'll do to prevent it from happening again." After discussing this for a while, you can add, "What can I do to help you from getting into this situation again?"

All of these tips are good, but only when we demonstrate unmistakable love. The key word here is "unmistakable." Don't just assume they know that you love them while you're yelling at them and confiscating their phone! Make it so "unmistakably" obvious that you love them, and their consequence is only to help them avoid veering off course from a path they believe in.

Parents don't earn popularity points when they punish their kids, but this isn't about popularity. This is about loving them enough to follow through, and caring about them enough to be there to lift them up when they're down.

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