



Discipline WITHOUT Punishment

BY Supriya Padmanabhan and Sujata Dewaji

Last month we had questioned whether the tools that we use most often (reward & punishment) actually help our children develop a sense of inner discipline. Or do they instill fear, anger, submission or rebellion. This month we look at positive methods of discipline that leave both parent and child feeling calmer without straining the relationship.

No single method of positive-disciplining (or disciplining without the use of the carrot or the stick) works every time. Different situations warrant different approaches. Sometimes we have had a bad day and that gets reflected in our interaction with our child. However awareness and constant evaluation of our parenting helps us in our journey.

There are four broad ways to approach discipline. We will take them up one by one.

Understanding the needs of a child

As children develop and grow, they have natural needs. If we provide an environment that gives them the freedom to satisfy their physical and emotional needs, their growth will be satisfactory.

As toddlers explore, feel and throw things, they are actually learning about height, weight, textures and so forth.

When Vineet was scribbling on the wall, his mother gave him a black board to write on and chart papers to scribble on. She firmly said, "The blackboard and charts are for writing, not the walls." Knowing that his need was to explore and to express himself, she gave the artist other alternatives!

Ganesh's son Amit wanted to use his email account more often with his peer group. He was also spending far too much time

playing games on the computer. Since Amit loved football, Ganesh channelized him away from playing computer games, to watching football training videos online. Amit emailed his friends the links to famous goals, thus satisfying his emailing needs. Father and son then went out and practiced what they had downloaded.

Children rarely do anything without a sense of purpose. The key is to understand their need before we put an end to an activity.

Define the problem clearly and state the expected behaviour

Arun loved jigsaw puzzles. After playing with them, the pieces would get strewn on the floor. Later he would go off to play, without bothering to put them back. Children are so absorbed in their own world that they do not pay attention to the things around them. Clearing up is not a priority for them, when there are many other exciting things to do.

So what did his mother say? "There are puzzle pieces around the room." (State what you see). The room needs to be



cleared up, so that we can all walk freely without tripping over them.”(State what you expect) Arun responded promptly.

By describing the problem, the child sees a purpose in what he is being asked to do. He also



realises that the adult now trusts that he will respond accordingly. Instead, we often get emotional and melodramatic when describing the problem and its effect on us, especially with tasks that children find tedious. In such cases, constant reminders or playing the blame game does not work. In fact, the child resists and switches off.

For instance, Sonia found her daughter forgetful. Not wanting to nag or label her child as careless, she described the problem to her, “I find it really hard to help you with your homework when you do not have the required book.” Such a non-blaming statement worked wonders and her daughter developed a sense of responsibility over time.

When you state your expectation, the child is able to look at situations with a different perspective. A parent and child often see the same thing very differently, and we can ensure clarity by stating our expectations. Expectations are neutral. They carry no blame or recrimination.

Rules should be established, to prevent problem recurrence

Do establish rules, because rules give children the norms of behaviour. Rules

help develop a sense of cooperation and trust between members of the family. Apart from the ‘Children must sleep by 8.30’ type of rule, we should realise that children are receptive to rules that encompass the people around them. ‘We put away our things’, ‘We eat at the table’, holds good for parents too; only then would children recognise justice in the rules that get framed. Be open to discussing the rules with children and changing them if need be.

For example: A mother told her children, “I know that there have been times when I have been so angry that I have hit you. I want you to know that what I did was not right. I will try my best not to do it again. At the same time I want you also not to hit each other. From today, let’s make this a rule for all of us.

Notice that the parent has used more of ‘I’ and hardly any ‘You’. ‘I’ describes my feelings, and the effect on me. ‘You’ sounds accusing, blaming and chastising.

The children too brought up issues bothering them and made rules: Mummy and Daddy must not talk on the phone from 7 pm - 9 pm! No hitting allowed in this house.” They wrote it on a piece of paper and displayed it prominently.

Parents need to take relevant action when limits are broken.

Sometimes, despite the problem being repeatedly described, and despite well-established expectations and rules, the situation goes out of control. At this stage, a parent has to take action, but in such a way that the child recognises boundaries.

While Raju and Vikram were playing, they started fighting over a toy. They were getting very rough and were not inclined to listen to elders. The parents realized that all they could do was take action. Each picked up their child and said ‘I am

According to Alfie Kohn, the Parenting Guru, punishment as a form of discipline often fails, as it leaves the child feeling:



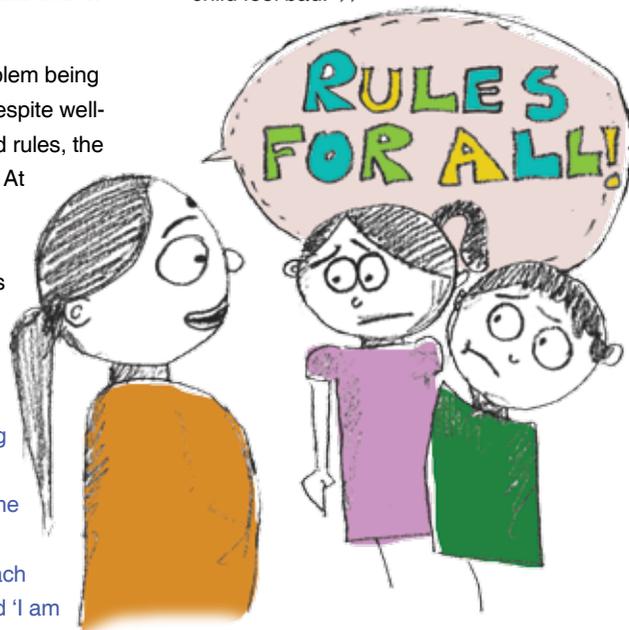
★ **Resentful, angry and powerless.** It distracts the kids from the real issue. He has learnt that the use of power is the best way to solve a problem.

★ **Humiliated.** The focus is on the wrong, not on how it should be done right. The child often gets labelled and over time accepts that label (lazy, rude, useless), as part of his personality.

★ **Misunderstood.** We show no faith that our child is working towards his or her own development. The relationship is based on a lack of trust. As he grows older this method of discipline becomes less effective.

sorry. There seems to be no way of working this out. You two need a break from each other.” Each took their child to a different room to calm him down.

Such action sets boundaries for the child without punishing, blaming or making the child feel bad. ▶▶



Responsibility through non-violent approaches

• Start giving choices from an early age.

When a child is given the power to choose at an early age, she develops the ability to discern, consider, evaluate and make choices for herself as she grows up.

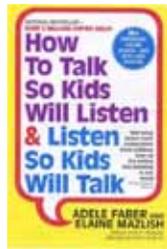
Examples: "Would you like to play with the car or the ball?", "Do you want to stop playing now or after ten minutes?", "Which T-shirt do you prefer – the green or the red?"

As parents, we often take away choices and opt for a straight 'No' because this is less work for us. Saying 'No' is inevitably, a form of punishment, of denial. Instead of an outright refusal, give her limited choices.

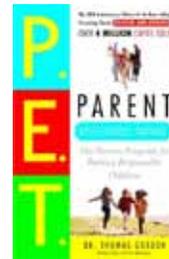
For instance, Ruchi did not want idlis for breakfast. Neha called her a fussy eater and insisted she cannot have anything else. Neha's aim was to teach the child to be considerate of the person who is making the breakfast, and to learn to eat what is given to her. But when her husband asked for orange juice instead of tea, she realized that we all have the freedom to ask for variation, within limits. She then offered Ruchi the option of cornflakes or idlis.

• **Help the child develop a healthy attitude towards error.** A child who can accept his mistake and make amends is an honest child.

Resources



HOW TO TALK SO KIDS WILL LISTEN AND LISTEN SO KIDS WILL TALK
by Faber & Mazlish



PARENT EFFECTIVENESS TRAINING
by Thomas Gordon

Instead of yelling at a child about the mess of spilt milk a parent can show him ways to make amends, "Let's get the mop and clean it". He feels good about cleaning up and will try to be more careful the next time. He also does not resort to denying his role in the act.

When the child tears a page from a book, a positive response would be "Let's get cello-tape and stick it." The child gets the message that books are to be taken care of and he feels that he can set things right.

• **Teach the child problem-solving.** This will stand him in good stead later in life.

This method works very well with two children who are unable to agree on something. As a mediating parent, conclude only where there is a win-win situation and everyone is satisfied.

In another example, a mother might say to her children "This is bothering me, what shall we do?" and together they would work on the problem.

Remember to keep an open mind as children at any age often come up with surprising solutions. For instance, 3-year-old Diya would forget to close her bottle cap tightly and brought a wet school bag home every day. Her mother stated the problem and asked the child if she could think of a solution. Diya drew a bottle on a piece of paper and asked her mother to stick it

onto the bag as a reminder to tighten it. And the solution worked well!

• **Let the child learn from natural consequences.** They then learn to take on responsibility without resentment.

Without saying "I told you so" we only need to communicate to the child that "This is the help I can provide you with, but you must take the responsibility for some things. If you need more help, please ask." We have to ensure that the child does not experience the situation as a punishment or feel that the parent is abandoning him. For example, if he forgets his lunch box we still have to give him lunch in another box. But if he forgets his homework, facing the consequence in class will help him become more responsible.

The last word

Although disciplining with punishment or reward is what we are most familiar with, the results of using alternative, non-controlling methods are more effective in developing inner discipline and a sense of responsibility in children. Mutual trust and respect deepen among parent and children, through such communication. Children grow up with a healthy self-esteem. ■

Note: All stories and examples are real life but names of parents and children have been changed.

SUPRIYA PADMANABHAN AND SUJATA DEWAJI ARE PART OF **PARENTING MATTERS** - AN ORGANISATION THAT CREATES FORUMS FOR PARENTS TO SHARE AND DISCUSS THEIR CONCERNS REGARDING PARENTING AND RECEIVE INPUTS ON PARENTING SKILLS.

