

# Myths about Discipline

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**W**hen parents are asked, “What do you want most for your child?”, the most common responses are Self-discipline, Honesty, Responsibility and Independent thinking. The irony is that when we raise our children, our own actions do not reflect this. In fact, the methods that we use to discipline our children seldom promote what most of us would like for our children, which is self-discipline or true inner discipline.

We believe in many myths regarding discipline. Let me elaborate.

## myth 1 Discipline means obedience

When we see a child who does as he is told, we smile and appreciate his obedience. Does obedience equal discipline? To obey someone, actually requires a person to completely quell his own thoughts and follow another’s orders, regardless of his own opinion. The reason why a child is willing to obey you is either out of fear, or a desire to please, or a deep conditioning

that the adult figure ‘knows best’.

An obedient child makes life so much easier for us. Take the example of children near crystal objects. The child sees a lovely glass ornament that is shiny and attractive. His brain tells him to touch it and learn more about it. As he leans forward to pick it up, his mom shouts “Don’t touch that!” Repeated verbal instructions and scolding make him obey without understanding why. The mother has just trained the child to obey her at the cost of ignoring his own instinct. As he grows older, adults are replaced by peers. His parents then ask him, “Why can’t you think for yourself? If your friend tells you to jump into the well, will you?!” They hardly realize that they have spent his entire childhood conditioning him for precisely this. As parents, we have to understand the need behind the child’s behaviour so that we can meet those needs and not make him obey blindly.

## myth 2 Punishment or scolding is necessary to teach children the right way

Punishing your child deters him from repeating the offending behaviour for a short while. Through threats and punishment, we can get a child to do what we want. But we must also realize why he is not repeating this offending behaviour. It is mostly because he wants to avoid getting punished. He has still not understood that it is the not right thing to do and hence should not repeat it. Take the case of the child who keeps her toys in place in her own house for fear of punishment. But in her friend’s place, this very same girl just runs away leaving the toys lying around without any care. This child has not truly developed the qualities of orderliness for its own sake.

Punishment comes from a position of authority that the parent has. It does not

encourage acknowledgment of the error by the child, or an understanding and acceptance of the true reason behind the disciplining. As a result, to avoid our disapproval and punishment, she may even begin to lie.

## myth 3 Rewards are a form of positive discipline

If punishment has so many adverse effects, then surely reward is a much better way to motivate or subtly discipline children? Not really. Punishment and reward are just two sides of the same coin. That coin, as we saw in the preceding paragraph, does not buy very much. Let me explain.

Every parent knows that a reward can quickly get a child to obey. So we use these all day, every day—from the smallest to the biggest task. “If you get ready soon, I will buy you chips”, “If you finish your dinner/ homework, you can watch TV”. We justify this by saying that the child has to be ‘motivated’. Children are indeed ‘motivated’ to do these things for the reward – and not because they know that these are things which have to be done. They are not disciplined enough to complete the tasks on hand.

For example, if you promise to reward your child with a bike for doing well in his exams, he may work hard and get good marks (hopefully without cheating). However, in the process, he has been robbed of the invaluable lesson of the importance of doing well for his own sense of achievement. In fact, subconsciously, many of us believe that the child has no motivation to do well without a reward. Because of the quick fix results that rewards give, children do not realise that getting ready in time for school, doing home work, putting away



toys, etc. are things that need to be done simply because it is a responsibility.

## What then is the alternative?

If there so many pitfalls in these ways of disciplining, then why do we continue using them? It is our own conditioning and the quick results that these methods provide. We function on an auto pilot mode, following whatever we had experienced in our childhood and that which 'works' for us.

The second and the most important reason are the assumptions that we have of our children. We think that if we do not constantly correct them, they will never learn.

To look at discipline in a new way, we have to first understand what we mean when we say that we want our child to be disciplined. Do we want him to be an individual who has his own set of values, who is a responsible human being, and is honest and true and to himself?

Once we are clear on this, we then need to reflect on our role as parents. Should we badger and beat our children into a shape that has been chosen by us or just walk alongside them and be their guide in whatever their heart desires?

Finding alternatives is a journey of exploration that each one of us must undertake. When one road is blocked, another will definitely open up. **Dialogue, problem solving, listening and speaking respectfully, being mindful of the needs of the child** - these are the paths we need to tread. The result is then a wonderful relationship, where a child believes in himself and has the discipline to achieve all that he dreams of. ■

**Next issue:** If punishment or reward are not the answers, then what should a parent do?

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## ParentsSpeak

**Mrinalini Ponappa Banerjea** - a mother of a nine year old boy and four year old girl

"When I found that I had a choice to deal with discipline in a different way, I became more balanced. I did not feel the need to shout or scold. As my children have no fear of punishment, they own up to their mistakes. They deal with them, make amends and move on. They are encouraged to hold on to their own ideas and thoughts and are on the way to becoming independent thinking individuals. "

**Sujata Dewaji** - Mother of a 13 year old boy and 15 year old girl

Not using external forms of control proved to be beneficial, as it has opened up communication channels between my children and me. We have discussions for better understanding and cooperation between us. We have developed mutual trust and respect for one another and amicably arrive at solutions - be it in the usage of mobile, internet, and phone or in the planning of their work schedules.

## Suggested Reading

**These books would help you discover alternative ways of discipline:**

**Unconditional Parenting**  
by Alfie Kohn

**Discipline That Works**  
by Thomas Gordon

**Parent Effectiveness Training**  
by Thomas Gordon

