

# ■ Positive Discipline Strategies

**THE WORD DISCIPLINE** means teach or guide. It doesn't mean punish or control. Parents who discipline successfully see discipline as an ongoing responsibility to teach. The best disciplinarians (or teachers) hold high expectations and give appropriate consequences or allow them to occur naturally, rather than dole out arbitrary punishments when their children fall short of those expectations.

Several disciplinary strategies can help young people develop control of behaviors and their outcomes. Some of these approaches can be used to spotlight and further encourage positive behaviors. Others can be used to steer them away from negative behaviors. While some discipline is a reaction, depending on a situation or your child's particular need at the moment, the most important aspect of discipline is ongoing positive attention.

## ■ PAYING POSITIVE ATTENTION

When babies cry and a parent's face soon appears above the crib, they learn their first lesson about how they control their environment. They can't yet articulate it, but they know, "If I cry, someone will come and pick me up, feed me, change me, and take care of me." As they get older, children become masters at controlling our attention.

Children crave parents' attention. When they don't get enough of it, they find ways to make us pay attention by doing something we cannot ignore, like interrupt, yell, whine, talk back, or pick a fight with a sibling. Then our attention is usually paid in negative ways, like scolding, criticizing, lecturing, threatening, or punishing. These negative ways of paying attention are ineffective and instill powerlessness rather than a sense of control. The cycle continues because kids begin to see that type of attention as what they expect and learn to need from parents.

As we list a litany of reasons why children shouldn't have done something, our efforts often backfire because we make them feel inadequate and incompetent. They want to prove our dire predictions or assessment of their behavior wrong. This doesn't build resilience.

If we want to diminish negative behaviors, we can short-circuit them by giving kids more frequent doses of positive attention. Unfortunately, we tend to focus primarily on their undesirable behaviors and fall into a pattern of responding only to those. If this has been your experience, here's a simple way to break the pattern. Keep a diary for a week and note all your interactions with your child. When he wants your attention, how

does he get it each time? Begin to recognize that many of his annoying or undesirable behaviors may be attention-seeking ploys. How do you respond? Once you become more aware of your pattern, you'll be better able to replace negative attention with positive attention.

Some ways to pay positive attention include catching kids being good. Show appreciation for the little things they do or say, things we often overlook, such as getting their school gear together on time or helping with daily chores. Praise them with words that show you have really noticed and appreciated something they have done, rather than generalized phrases like, "You're so terrific." I'm certainly not against telling kids they're terrific, but let them know *why*. "I think you're terrific to help your little brother learn to ride a bike."

Other ways to pay positive attention can occur in simple, daily encounters. Minor occasions are wonderful opportunities to pay loving attention in ways that have nothing to do with performance. Your focus is not on grades or scores, just on being together. The more positive attention we give them, the less they feel a need to capture our attention by behaving in less desirable ways. But all the positive attention in the world won't guarantee a young person will never misbehave. What do we do then?

## ■ APPROPRIATE CONSEQUENCES

From an early age, children should learn that certain misbehaviors bring unwanted consequences. Hitting younger siblings means a *time-out*, sitting quietly for a certain amount of time, away from the center of the action, and losing the positive attention they crave. Failing to finish homework means loss of television time. Leaving piles of dirty laundry around their rooms means their clothes won't be clean the next time they want to wear them.

These consequences are appropriate because they fit the crime. When parents have to discipline by using a punishment, it should be reasonable and related to the offense so that children understand the direct consequence. When they spill or break something, for

example, they have to clean it up or fix it. A consequence that is too stiff or unrelated to the offense (say, they cannot go out with their friends to a party because they haven't picked up their socks) takes their focus off the misbehavior and prevents them from thinking about how to correct it. They become defensive or feel like victims. They become angry, focus on your unfairness, and sometimes even want to get even ("I'll show them! I'll never..."). Overly harsh or arbitrary punishments send the messages, "You aren't in control. We, your parents, control what happens to you. There's no logical connection between your actions and consequences."

Certain patterns typically emerge between children and parents when parents try to guide kids toward a safe behavior (such as, "I need to know where you're going and who you'll be with."), get them to adhere to safety rules ("Bike riding requires a helmet."), or contribute to smooth operations of the home ("Fold your clothes; clean the dishes."). It may be that you have different interactions with different children or that you and your spouse have different patterns. As typical interactions are described, think about which ones sound familiar.

First we issue an order like, "Clean up your room!" The young person may follow the command, and all is well. If he ignores our command or argues with us, everyone's stress level increases. We may repeat the order several times. Most kids know their parents' threshold for repeating commands. Some parents repeat them 3 times; others repeat 5, 6, or even 7 times. Our kids know just how far to push us and how many refusals they can get away with before we give in or get tough.

Why do they do this? Because they are engaging us, holding our attention. The problem is that parents and children caught in this repetitive cycle of commands waste a lot of time nagging and refusing, nagging and refusing.

If they don't comply after our first, second, or seventh request, we move up a notch to the threat level. "If you don't clean up your room, you can't go to the birthday party!" Now he must decide to accept the threat and obey or call our bluff ("I don't want to go to the party anyway!") because if he buys into the threat and complies, our attention will disappear. Either way, the tone in the household moves from nagging to hostile.

If we let confrontations get to this point, we get angry because the child is disobedient and defiant. We are at a lose-lose crossroad. We have 2 options—we can follow through on the threat, or we can cave in. If we follow through with the threat, our children don't learn useful lessons. They feel like victims of controlling parents;

they learn nothing about taking responsibility or solving a problem. They focus instead on how we made them pick up their rooms or kept them from going to a party. The punishment shifts away from the original request or command and now focuses on their rising defiance and disobedience. Missing a party because socks are left on the floor seems unfair to them.

When we get to this point with teenagers, we are sometimes talking about problems and consequences much more serious than cleaning up and going to parties. They may be out after curfew, we may not know where they are, and we're so frantic that our threats become almost hysterical. Most parents are unlikely to say, "You are 25 minutes late. I have been worried sick. I was ready to call the police! I'm going to come up with a consequence so fair and so directly related to your lateness that you will really learn this lesson!" No, hysterical parents instead have adrenaline coursing through their veins and say, "That's it, young lady! You are grounded for 2 weeks!" Parents may consider grounding a gift to themselves because it means they will know where their child is. To adolescents, grounding feels like being sent to prison, and they don't see how 25 minutes even begins to compare to 2 weeks. They learn nothing and become increasingly hostile.

Parents often realize that their initial threats were too harsh, so in a more rational state they take the second option, caving in ("OK, I give up. You can pick up your room after the party," or "All right, never mind. You're not grounded. Just be home on time tomorrow, OK?"). When we cave in, adolescents learn that they can manipulate us, hold our attention even in a negative way, and still win by not obeying our original request. Teens who learn to manipulate parents or simply endure our nagging and anger because they know they'll win in the end are headed for trouble.

To prevent these lose-lose situations, try to avoid getting to that critical point in the first place. The critical turning point is immediately after you make the initial command. Don't be pulled into these spiraling negative cycles. Instead, make it clear from the beginning that certain behaviors are not negotiable and consequences are immediate. It may seem harsh to have immediate consequences, but it is far better than wasting so much of your valuable relationship time on nagging, hostility, or empty threats.

A word to the wise here—pick your battles. On those things that really matter to you, have clear and immediate consequences. But remember that part of growing up involves kids' negotiating boundaries and figuring out what they can handle. Parents who make rules about everything or hold a rigid sense of exactly

how kids should behave in every situation prevent them from benefiting fully from their own experiences of decision-making and boundary-setting.

### ■ ADVANCE PLANNING

You can avoid negative punishment cycles by planning fair, consistent, and predetermined consequences that will occur if your child refuses to comply with your request or behaves irresponsibly. Make these consequences known in a concise, clear way. If you plan ahead, you can set consequences that are reasonable and linked to the problem, and your child will be disciplined instead of punished.

When you are in the middle of a problem or confrontation, give options in a calm, straightforward tone. "If you want a ride to the mall, you'll have to finish your chores first." Then stick to your statement. Don't be pulled into the old pattern. By making consequences immediate and linked to his choices or actions, you help him understand that he has some control. You, the parent, set the limits, but he controls his choices and consequences within those limits.

### ■ FAMILY MEETINGS

Sitting down together to solve problems is a great way to allow adolescents to experience more control of their behaviors. Family meetings don't have to be (and certainly *shouldn't* have to be) saved for problem occasions only. They can be used for pleasant purposes, such as discussing family vacations, whether to get a new pet, or what color to paint the house. They can be brainstorming sessions—what to get Grandpa for his next birthday or where to send letters to get the local government to plant more trees.

Family meetings can be reactive: "We have a problem, now what can we do to solve it?" They can also be viewed as a preventive strategy. As advance planning sessions, they go a long way in addressing how to respond to situations clearly and directly when they arise. Encourage everyone to brainstorm the potential problem and its possible solutions.

Family meetings offer a safe, relaxed environment in which adolescents can think in advance about their behaviors. This is an opportunity for them to develop more abstract, cause-and-effect thinking as they discuss benefits and disadvantages of possible actions and consequences. Everyone's contribution should be heard and respected in these family discussions. The more input they have, the more likely they will be to comply with decisions. You want your child to propose reasonable, fair solutions and consequences, but don't

forget that parents are the final arbiters and ultimately set the limits. You can do this without issuing threats or commands.

The consequences you agree on should be spelled out clearly so that when the time comes to test them, they will be understood and effective. It may be helpful to allow your child to run through some what-if scenarios. "What if I come home too late and I haven't called?" "What if I get in trouble with...?" "What if I am going to be late but call to tell you what the problem is and how I'm handling it?" This process will help your child clarify the purpose of the rules and more importantly, understand the limits of your flexibility.

### ■ INCREASING KIDS' CONTROL

When discussing problems and solutions with your child, encourage her to negotiate. You are the ultimate limit-setter and certain misbehaviors are nonnegotiable, such as verbal abuse, stealing, or whatever you deem unacceptable. But the majority of issues will probably not be of the nonnegotiable quality. By actively negotiating, kids reap several benefits. They exert some control of events. They will be more likely to follow through on compromises that they've had a role in reaching. As teenagers and young adults, they will have learned give-and-take skills that will come in handy when they must negotiate with peers, teachers, or bosses.

Whatever consequences you agree on, expect that problems will inevitably arise, so be ready for them with the appropriate consequence. Don't make adolescents feel that they have ever made a mistake in coming to you when they've messed up or fallen into trouble. Let the consequence teach the lesson, but don't let your disappointment in their behavior or your anger take over.

When children do mess up, let your essential message be, "Yes, you've done something wrong, but I still love you." Statements like this don't erase or diminish the disciplinary consequence, but they will help ensure that your child feels secure enough to come to you with problems. If we don't send a strong message of unconditional love, even in the face of disappointment over behavior, kids may turn away from us the next time they do something wrong or find themselves in trouble.

### ■ A REIN IN EACH HAND

As children grow, we parents often feel that we're holding 2 reins. We grip one tightly to keep them safe, while the other is looser as we gradually give them more slack to move away from us and explore increasing freedom. We're constantly juggling these reins, pulling

one a bit tighter, letting the other out an inch or two. We don't want to overprotect or control adolescents too strictly, yet we don't dare let them have too much freedom before they are responsible enough to handle it. It requires a delicate balance, but the trick is to increase their freedom gradually, while at the same time minimize chances that they'll make unsafe or unwise choices.

## ■ EARNED FREEDOMS

We can take advantage of teens' natural desire for independence by guiding them along safely if we put some safety nets in place. I call one of those nets *earned freedoms*, which are built on the foundation that parents don't hand out privileges and freedoms lightly, and neither do we use them as bribes. Earned freedoms are just that—earned. Here's how to institute this practice in your family.

Sit down and explain that you and your adolescent can come up with a plan that serves you both well by ensuring 2 things—she can have more freedom and privileges and you can be sure she's safe and responsible. Together, you draw up lists of what you each want and need. You'll discuss these, negotiate, put them in writing, and come up with a written contract.

Your child may want to stay out later at night, but you need to be sure she gets enough sleep to be healthy and alert for school. Your child may plead for a larger allowance, but you want to be sure she knows how to handle money responsibly. She may want to go somewhere with her friends, but you need to know if there will be adults present and when and how she'll get home. She may be ready to drive, and you may be eager to let her drive, but you need to put into place the restrictions that have been proven to save lives—limiting the number of teenagers in the car, no driving after a certain hour, no cell phone use while driving, exposure to more complex driving situations (like 4-lane highways or bad weather conditions) only after the easier ones have been mastered, and driving on her own only after a significant amount of adult supervision.

From both your lists, you can draft a contract of sorts. Her wants should be linked to your expectations of her responsible behavior. If your child wants to go places with friends, she can earn this privilege by calling you at an appointed time to check in and let you know where they are, who they're with, and how she's getting home. If she is ready to drive, you will allow this if she follows your safety plan.

Your contract will work most effectively if you reevaluate it from time to time to see how it's working. You'll probably hit several snags, but try to stick with it and tailor it to be more effective when necessary. As you work through the earned freedoms process, your child will enjoy having more control and will undoubtedly act more responsibly to keep that control and gain greater freedom and privileges. It's a reinforcer of good behavior as well as a deterrent of negative behavior.

The earned freedoms technique works best when you make the privileges and freedoms measurable and verifiable. For example, a new privilege can be earned when it is monitored or verified by some measure, such as a certain length of time (say, the number of hours spent watching television or doing homework). If your side of the contract says, "I need to know you're keeping up with your schoolwork," that can be measured by the report card or amount of time spent on homework. If kids aren't keeping up their side of the bargain and their grades are slipping, the consequence is to decrease the amount of time they spend on television, computer, phone, or other amusements.

In the case of teenagers and safety concerns, adolescents should be very clear—before they earn freedoms to go out on their own—about how strongly you feel about following the rules. They should know which freedoms and privileges will be unearned (otherwise known as *lost*) if they don't act responsibly to prove they are capable of those freedoms. For example, a parent could say, "I want you to understand that if you are late, I will not allow you to stay out until 11:00 again. You have already proven to me that you're capable of following a 10:00 curfew. You will return to that earlier curfew if you are not able to follow the later one. I think you are ready to handle an 11:00 curfew, so go have a great time."

When your family has worked out an earned freedoms contract, go back and consider its effect. Recall the importance of having immediate consequences at the critical point after your first command, so your family isn't dragged into a fruitless cycle of repeating and threatening, nagging and arguing. Pick your battles and don't overregulate your child's choices. But for the big items that involve safety and responsibility, parents must have clear guidelines, stick to them, and make the consequences immediate. This stick-to-itiveness and immediate response will be far easier when the consequences are understood in advance—easier still because your child has helped formulate that understanding.

Essentially the contract says, "I know that I will earn this freedom or privilege by being willing to show responsibility and keep this freedom by proving my responsibility. I also know that I will lose this freedom when I do not show I can be responsible." Parents have the consequence in advance and at their disposal to use when necessary ("You have not shown responsibility here. You have lost this freedom."). The advantage of revising the contract every few months, perhaps at the start of each new season, is that you have a history of past successes—freedoms your child has proven she is capable of handling. When you need to come up with a fair consequence, you could revert to a freedom your child proved able to handle in the past. For example, "You said that if you stayed out until 9:00, you would have time to finish your homework. You didn't finish your homework. I'm afraid that you'll have to begin coming in at 8:30 again. You were able to have fun then and still complete your homework."

## ■ IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

The earned freedoms technique can improve communication in your home for several reasons. Most obviously, it will improve because you will be discussing how to help your family function better on a regular basis, but also because you will be hearing your child's self-assessment of what she believes she can handle and you will calmly be able to share concerns.

Perhaps the most important reason is this—when you clarify that your need is to know she's safe and responsible, you are sending the message that you're willing to trust her, negotiate, hear her side, and consider her ideas. Most teens expect parents to tell them what to do. They think we want to control them rather than delegate some measure of control to them. When you first propose the earned freedoms concept, your child may look at you skeptically. As you work through it, she will realize that your motivation is to help her grow safely.

*Adapted from Ginsburg KR, Jablow MM. Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings. 2nd ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2011*

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your health care professional. There may be variations in treatment that your health care professional may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

Copyright © 2014 American Academy of Pediatrics. From *Reaching Teens: Strength-Based Communication Strategies to Build Resilience and Support Healthy Adolescent Development*. Permission to make single copies for noncommercial, educational purposes is granted.