

I'm At My Wits End, Nothing Seems to Work---
Discipline and the Adopted Child
with Special Needs

“The goal of all discipline is self discipline.”

Dr. T. Berry Brazilton

Discipline: training that develops self-control, character, or orderliness and efficiency.

Self-control: the capacity to resist an impulse or urge.

The goal of all discipline is to help the child develop the capacity for self discipline! True self control is not possible without a conscience. ***The parent child relationship is the cornerstone of conscience development.*** the child exerts control to avoid displeasing the parent. Displeasing the parent causes an immediate and temporary loss of self esteem, the young child feels the temporary disapproval as a loss of affection and a loss of self esteem. These short lived and very uncomfortable feelings increase the child's desire to give up his/her impulsive drive to stay in the parents good graces. The desire to please the parent, gradually becomes integrated as a desire to avoid guilt feelings, to please the self by maintaining self esteem. In our search for effective discipline, we must examine and search for parenting techniques that build conscience. We need to employ disciplinary methods that make ***learning self control*** possible: methods that educate, that instruct, that model self control. Where and how do we find parenting techniques that teach control and build conscience?

There are three reasons a child would give up the pleasure of satisfying a spontaneous impulse, urge or desire:

- (1) to please the parent
- (2) to avoid displeasing the parent
- (3) to avoid negative consequences

The first two reasons listed above build internalized self control. The desire to please the parent and to avoid parental displeasure “goes inside of self” and becomes, over the years, the desire to feel good about the self and to avoid the drop in self-esteem and the guilt that children feel when their parents disapprove of their behavior.

The third reason to control impulses, to avoid negative consequences, is by its nature only an external control. Logical, negative consequences that do not last too long and are not too harsh can help build motivation to exercise self-control. Yet, alone, (without the desire for parental approval and the desire to avoid disapproval) negative consequences *never* help the child *internalize* self-control. Control will only be exercised if the child perceives the negative consequence and if the child does not feel “he can do the crime without doing the time,” : Does not believe he/she can get away with it.

Consequences that are perceived as harsh, angry and/or last too long evoke resentment in the child, resentment that interferes with the drop in self esteem and guilt that are essential ingredients in building a conscience.

Discipline teaches the child to control and/or resist a spontaneous urge or impulse. The child experiences the parents' **temporary** disapproval as a temporary "fall from grace". What's outside goes inside: as the child feels the withdrawal of loving approval outside of self he/she experiences a *temporary* drop in self-love (inside of self), a *temporary* drop in self-esteem. The emotional response to this drop in self-esteem and temporary loss of parental approval results in feelings of "guilt".

Guilt is an essential experience for the development of self-control and of a conscience. If the parenting techniques or responses to inappropriate behavior do not produce temporary feelings of guilt then there is no internal motivation for impulse control.

Punishment, the loss of privileges, timeouts, grounding, up to and including spanking, do not necessarily produce guilt. Punishment therefore does not necessarily teach self-control. Parents believe that the child will avoid the appropriate behavior to avoid the negative experiences that come with the behavior. Some times this works. Yet even when punishment works, the behavior is controlled not from a desire to please the parent and therefore the self, but from an external motivator, the desire solely to avoid punishment. Self-control is, and must eventually be, internal.

If control remains external the child will not build a conscience. When external controls are absent there will be no motivation to control impulses. Children without conscience can curb impulses to avoid negative consequences, they do not however have the capacity to curb their impulses when "no one is watching" or when they can convince themselves that they will get away with it."

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What's outside goes inside: if a child experiences the discomfort of parental displeasure and the joy and excitement of pleasing the parent *over and over and over and over*, **then and only then** will the desire to please the parent and the capacity to give up immediate personal goals to avoid displeasing the parent go inside the self: be integrated as an emerging conscience!

"There are really no fancy tricks in the education of the child for self-control. All the clever stratagems, the household recipes for obtaining co-operation of a child in the control of impulse boil down to one essential point: The child cooperates in his training because he wants parental love and approval and he feels parental disapproval as a temporary withdrawal of affection and esteem."

Fraiberg, Selma, *The Magic Years*,
Charles Scribner's Sons,
New York, New York,
1959, pg. 244

Conscience building, the goal of all discipline, is dependent on the temporary loss of parental approval which results in a temporary loss of self-esteem. Fraiberg, quoted above, on the importance of parental approval and disapproval in discipline goes on to point out that the cornerstone of discipline is the parent child relationship.

"if the fundamental love ties between parents and a child are absent or disturbed, the disapproval or criticism of a parent will have little effect except to confirm the child's feeling that he is unloved and that no matter what he does he will not gain parental love or lose it." pg. 244

Parents living with adopted and foster children who do not yet have healthy parental attachments frequently live with the realization that parental disapproval is not effective in producing behavior change. They often get caught in a cycle of increasing the punishment, taking away more privileges for longer periods of time, in the sometimes desperate hope, that the child will eventually get tired of 'paying the piper' and will control his/her behavior. Sometimes this works: **And even when it works the motivation for control is and remains external!**

The parents have sacrificed the long term healthy goal of conscience building for the short term relief of behavior change. While this sounds harsh it is not meant to be so: when you are exhausted, irritated,

feeling hopeless and helpless, it is all too easy to slip into punitive behavior management; in truth it is very hard not to!

What can parents do to teach self-control and build conscience?

First: build and maintain the parent child connection. Play with your children, share joy and laughter: Do not withhold affection for long periods because you are worn out, angry or ticked off. Your children are dependent upon you to engage with them, to offer affection, joy and warmth every day, throughout the day. This does not mean ignore inappropriate behaviors.

Express your disapproval and disappointment when the child exhibits inappropriate behaviors. Say with conviction that you are disappointed in your child's choices. If you are angry state that clearly and firmly: ideally without yelling. As we teach young children...Use your words!

If your child came to your home after experiencing loss, neglect, abuse and or institutionalization, **base your response to the behavior on the "normative age" for that behavior**, not on your child's chronological age. Children with difficult beginnings are missing some crucial developmental steps. Their stuck behaviors are signposts to ages where they have gaps in development. (See the handout: 'New responses to Old Behaviors'.)

Wherever possible redirect your child and/or offer substitute gratification. Substituting one desirable experience for the experience, activity or item the child wishes is a strong and valuable lesson in controlling impulsive behavior. The child essentially 'agrees to let go of his/her desired goal, or to delay the goal, to accept a goal, treat or experience you offer. Parents underestimate the powerful lesson this entails. The child pleases you and gets a substitute pleasure, not his/her first choice: the child learns to let go of the impulse and accept something else.

When loss of privileges are necessary as a response to unacceptable behavior make sure that the lost privilege :

- (1) is a logical result of the behavior
- (2) does not last too long, triggering revenge fantasies rather than remorse
- (3) offers some choices, this acknowledges that the child has some control, e.g. "I can not allow you to upset everybody else with you whining, You can choose to go to your room, or you can choose to go out to the porch until you feel you are able to join us without screaming."
This is a far different experience than "Go to your room."
- (4) is not so harsh or happens so often that the child perceives it as just punishment for her/his sins and feels relieved to have wiped the slate clean.

Children who receive repeated losses of privilege that:

- (a) last too long,
- (b) are too harsh
- (c) are delivered with so much anger that the child does not experience the parents disapproval

often work with a "ledger system" of crime and punishment. When these children feel as if they have offended too much, are bad sinners so to speak, they push their parents' buttons repeatedly. They are "asking" to be punished. Punishment when delivered, (especially over reactive punishment, delivered in harsh tones, without reconnection experiences with the parent) is perceived as wiping the slate clean: I sinned, I needed punishing, now I am free to sin again. When the exhausted parents'

finally lose it and yell at these children, the children often settle right down and smile. Parents are left feeling trapped and helpless. The cycle of balancing the ledger has happened many times and the parents know that no real learning has occurred.

Use Father Flanagan's rule: for every negative behavior you mention or notice mention and comment on at least twice as many positives. When founding Boys Town Father Flanagan knew that the boys he wanted to help were from difficult environments and regardless of their external demeanor, thought poorly of themselves. He made a rule that when staff corrected the child, or criticized or punished that child they must offer the child 10 positive experiences, (positive comments, appreciations, a friendly connecting wink, etc.) in the next 30 to 60 minutes. To make it easier for parents to get started try at least 2 positives to every negative. As you get used to this method increase the number of positive observations, thank yous, appreciations, comments and gestures.

Remember that it takes many, many repetitions of behavior and disapproval to help a child learn to control his/her impulses. The task sometimes seems endless. Still it is less exhausting to repeat your disapproval and praise compliance than it is to give out punishments over and over and feel as if your child (working on the ledger system) is asking for it.

Play, play, play with your child. Build positive, pleasurable experiences into your daily lives. Do not withhold connection for more than a very short while after inappropriate behavior. Good dog trainers know that before and after every training session you need to play with your dog. The play builds the bond between the you, increasing the dogs experience of pleasure with you and increasing the dogs desire to please you. Your child or children need this just as much as a dog does, probably more.