



UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

FCS2016

EXTENSION

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

## Guiding Children Toward Self-Discipline<sup>1</sup>

Evelyn Rooks-Weir<sup>2</sup>

When adults talk about disciplining children, often they really want to control children. Parents may need help with methods of guiding their children toward self-discipline or self-control.

Self-discipline is the process of developing personally and socially constructive ways of behaving to meet our needs, as defined by Dr. Thelma Harms.<sup>1</sup>

Helping children grow into self-disciplined adults who are accepted by other people is not an easy task. No one has ever written a book that spells out precisely how to do it. However, there are many books written that can help parents understand some basic principles of child development and guidance. These principles will serve as guides for parents to help children learn to be positive, contributing members of society.

An important beginning is to understand the difference between *guidance*, *discipline*, and *punishment*:

- guidance is advice or assistance;
- discipline is training that develops self-control or orderly conduct;

- punishment is to cause to undergo pain, loss, and suffering for a crime or wrong doing.<sup>2</sup>

From these definitions, we recognize that children need to be guided toward training that helps them learn to control their behavior for orderly conduct. When they are assisted to learn appropriate behavior, they will seldom need to be punished for wrong doing.

### The Child's World: Family

The family is a child's first "society." It is the young child's world. It is important that children be helped to learn how to function and get along with other people in this family. Before a child can feel capable of coping with a bigger group, he must feel good about his ability to get along well in this smaller world. Helping a young child learn to share and assume some responsibility in the family is important. For example, children have been found to be capable of assuming responsibility for a number of household chores. This helps them develop self-discipline as well as self-confidence.<sup>3</sup>

1. This document is FCS 2016, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: April 2000. First published: June 1990. Reviewed: April 2000. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>

2. Written by Evelyn Rooks-Weir, former Associate Professor, Human Development and reviewed by Garret D. Evans, Psy.D., Assistant Professor, Clinical Psychology, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

## Basic Needs

Every human being has certain needs. Because they are universal, they are called basic needs. In rearing children, remember they each have basic needs. Parents or other caregiving adults must also remember that they, too, have basic needs that must be fulfilled.

It is easy to understand that all people need food, clothing, and shelter. It may not be as easy to understand that all people need love, respect, and understanding. A classic study on the growth and development of orphaned infants, conducted by Renee Spitz, illustrates this. Those who were given love and attention, as well as food and physical comfort, thrived. Many others who were fed and provided physical comfort, but given a minimum of attention, died.

### Love

Love is a basic need that is expressed through behaviors. One way that love is expressed is through touching. This is true for adults as well as infants and young children. Infants and young children especially need to be hugged, cuddled, and kissed in wholesome, healthy ways. We hear much today about the abuse of children that involves touching. There is an easily discernible difference in fondling a child for pleasure of the adult and touching a child in a loving gesture to show the child that he is cared for.

Love is also expressed in ways other than touching. Providing food, clothing, shelter, and keeping the child clean are expressions of love. Love may also be expressed by providing a stable routine and consistent rules for the child. Expression of love is a part of guiding young children toward self-discipline.

Parents are sometimes confused when authorities tell them to love their children and yet be consistent with rules. They seem to think that rules for a child to live by and love cannot be administered together. However, rules and love do go together. If children are to grow up to be respected and cared for by other people, they must learn to live by some rules. If parents do not help the young child learn

some rules in the small group, the rules of the larger society may be very difficult for the child to learn and abide by.

Harsh rules and consequences do not belong in any healthy family, but *consistent* rules and consequences do. The appropriate consequences will depend upon the age of the child. For example, an infant may spill some food while eating. This child has not developed muscle control to always prevent spills. An older child may be expected to clean up a spill that was the result of carelessness. The expectation for the child to clean up her spilled food should exist at all times — even when guests such as grandparents are present. The child will feel loved if this is not seen as punishment for an accident, but rather a logical consequence. If the child is punished for this behavior, then, he will likely feel unloved, and embarrassed, especially if guests are present.

### Respect

This brings us to the basic need of respect. Every human needs to feel respected. Feeling respected helps us develop self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem is essential for children to grow up to be productive citizens. Too often, adults forget that children are people, too. We forget to respect their wishes or opinions when decisions have to be made. We may assume that children have no preferences about certain decisions that are very important to them. The family conference is an excellent way to be sure that every family member has an opportunity to express his feelings about decisions that effect everyone.

Sometimes we forget to respect the child's feelings when punishment is administered. Such lack of respect may cause embarrassment and resentment toward parents. In research conducted by Delores Curran, she found that strong families did not emphasize discipline or punishment of children. Instead, they worked on developing loving, caring relationships with children. If and when a problem arose in the family, they discussed possible rules that would help overcome the problem.<sup>4</sup> This helps children feel loved, and respected. Children, especially young ones, normally want to please parents. Communicating to the child what is

acceptable is a big part of helping the child behave in socially acceptable ways.

Often children misbehave because their repertoire of behavior is limited. In other words, they may not know acceptable ways to behave in order to get what they want. An example is a child kicking or biting simply to get attention. Surely this gets the attention, and this unacceptable behavior is then reinforced. A better approach would be to teach the child to use language to get attention. A child can get attention by speaking to the other person rather than kicking.

Adults need love and respect, too. This concept can and should be taught to children. Very young children have been found to be capable of expressing caring feelings toward others.<sup>5</sup> If parents recognize this, they can further help the child develop the capacity to fulfill this need of the parents. Parents should not, however, depend entirely on young children to fulfill their need for love and respect. Some parents do this, and become extremely frustrated when the infant or young child is unable to love them enough. Adults in healthy families reach out to other adults, as well as their children, for love and care.

Adults may become so frustrated trying to be perfect parents that they actually become weak parents. When mistakes are made they must be able to apologize to the child. To apologize is a sign of strength, not weakness. Parents must also recognize that they, too, have needs that must be fulfilled if they are to be able to function adequately. Families must work together to be sure that each member is becoming a fully functioning person.

## Causes of Behavior

Adults may make wrong assumptions about the behavior of children. They often overlook the real cause of the behavior. They may fail to look past the behavior itself to see the cause. "Bad" behavior is often the manifestation of "bad" feelings. When the feelings are changed, then the behavior will take care of itself. That is why strong families strive to help their members feel good about themselves. However, there will be times when each of us suffers from negative feelings. Discouragement may result

from failure to achieve something. Jealousy may result from success of those near us, or anger may result from someone carelessly running into us. Therefore, we need to learn acceptable ways to deal with these feelings.

Authorities remind us that understanding our feelings can help us cope with them. Recognizing and identifying a feeling is a first step in understanding it. Once this is achieved, then you may be able to begin to understand some causes of a particular feeling. When the cause of a feeling is understood, perhaps you can avoid the situation that causes it.

We have choices regarding how we express negative feelings. Sometimes even adults react violently when they are feeling badly. Children may have a temper tantrum when they feel badly or when they do not get what they want.

A major part of guiding children toward self-discipline is helping them understand their feelings and choose acceptable behavior to express these feelings. Sensitive parents try to empathize with children and their feelings. Understanding feelings and behavior of young children is sometimes difficult. Can you remember your first experience of feeling love when you were a young adolescent? This was a new kind of feeling, and you may have exhibited some rather strange behavior to express this feeling. Young children are experiencing many new feelings, and they may not know acceptable ways to express them.

## Energy

Understanding that young children normally have high levels of energy and curiosity is helpful when guiding them toward self-discipline. Children are not intending to misbehave when they run through a house. They simply have energy to run wherever they want to go, and they have not internalized the rule yet that running inside is not acceptable. The fact that children are curious may cause adults to believe that they are bad. Remember that curiosity is very important if the child is to succeed in life. It is a motivating factor in the child's learning. Therefore, adults need to respond to a child's curiosity so that it is nurtured. Knowing that

these are normal characteristics for young children will encourage adults to provide an environment that promotes self-discipline. Plan a safe place where children can be active. This will utilize some of the child's abundant energy and help the child develop physically, too. An indoor safe play area is needed for those times when the weather does not allow outdoor play. If you live where space is limited, then try to find a nearby park or open space where you can take your child for active play. If your child is being cared for outside your home, be sure there is adequate space for children to run and participate in active games.

Children can and will learn rules about when and where they are expected to be active or inactive. However, they will likely have to be reminded about these rules several times. It is easier for them to learn consistent rules than rules that change often.

### Curiosity

To nurture a child's curiosity is to encourage the child to learn. Do not feel inadequate because you cannot answer all your child's questions. It is okay for the child to learn that adults do not know everything. You will be able to answer many questions your child asks and you can help the child look for answers to some other questions. Your public librarian will be able to recommend books that can help you with many questions that children ask. If you help a child with questions he asks, then he will be better prepared to accept the fact that you do not have answers to all his questions. Children seem to sense such honesty from adults.

### A Bad Day Now and Then

Another element of understanding children is to remember that each of us has a bad day now and then when we do not behave our best. If the child is tired or not feeling well, then behavior will be affected. Sometimes what is interpreted as bad behavior of a child is really bad feelings of an adult. Many children are needlessly punished because their parents feel badly for one reason or another. Before punishing your child, be sure that you have analyzed the situation to see whether you are responsible for her behavior.

## A Plan for Guiding Children

Most parents would agree that they want their children to grow up to be self-disciplined, productive citizens. To accomplish this, they need a plan. Dr. Thelma Harms reminds us that parents need to understand the stages in the development of moral judgment, and the extent to which the child is able to control his behavior.<sup>6</sup>

Children two years old and younger do not understand right and wrong.<sup>7</sup> They are guided by the response of adults around them. Because these young children are developing their sense of trust at this time, they need an environment that allows them some freedom, but within limits. These children must rely entirely upon adults to guide their behavior. They will not understand that it is not acceptable to destroy magazines at a friend's house. If magazines are to be preserved, then either put them out of reach of the child, or keep the child away from them.

When children reach the age of about four or five, they begin to distinguish right and wrong of an event, but they do not associate intent with this. At six or seven, they will begin to understand that intent of behavior is associated with right and wrong.<sup>8</sup> For example a four-year-old child who is punished for deliberately knocking over a block tower may feel that his behavior is just as bad when a tower that he is working on accidentally falls. A slightly older child at age six or seven will be able to understand that *intent* affects this situation.

### The Importance of Rules

Young children will begin to understand rules when they are established to guide the child. The following suggestions can help you set up rules that guide children toward self-discipline.

- Try to state rules so that the child is helped to know what to do as well as what not to do.
- Try to have a few, simple rules. Plan the child's environment so that few rules are required.
- Be consistent with the few rules that you do establish. If adults are inconsistent with their rule enforcement, children are likely to be confused.

- Be reasonable when establishing and enforcing rules.<sup>9</sup>

As children reach an age when they can understand right from wrong, they can be involved in rule making. This is one way to get children to respect rules.

### **Punishment**

Punishment, as defined in the beginning of this publication, seems quite harsh for most offenses of children. However, most parents, at some time, do feel required to punish children as a way of guiding them toward self-discipline. In these instances, try to refrain from allowing your own negative feelings to direct your behavior.

Punishment needs to be administered soon after the child's disobedience. However, you should try to allow yourself time to gain control of your feelings and analyze the situation. Ask yourself why the child did what he did, before punishing the child. The old adage, count to ten before spanking the child, should be remembered. You may need even more time to consider the situation, but even ten seconds will remind you to be rational and reasonable when you punish a child.

Because young children normally want to please their parents, just knowing that they have displeased you is punishment for them. As children grow older, they can participate in determining what their punishment for disobedience should be. Children have been found to be harder on themselves, when determining their punishment, than understanding adults are.

The purpose of punishment is to discourage the behavior that it is associated with.<sup>10</sup> You should try not to use punishment of the child to express feelings of anger. When this happens, children may be abused.

Because children will respond differently to punishment, parents should consider several different methods. Effective punishment for one child may not be for another. Some methods of punishment are:

- Suffering natural consequences of behavior. If Suzie dawdles and misses her turn at the swing, then she may not be allowed a turn that play

period. Consideration must be given to whether the natural consequence is too harsh.

- Removing privileges as a means of punishing a child. Some authorities do not feel that this is effective with older children. You may find that talking with teenagers works better.<sup>11</sup>
- Ignoring misbehavior may be punishment for the child who is seeking attention by misbehaving. To counteract this, you may look for positive behavior on which to commend the child.
- Calling time out is an effective reaction to misbehavior of some children. This allows the child time to think about their behavior and regain composure before reentering the group.<sup>12</sup>

Certain methods of punishment are not recommended. They may have negative effects on children and not help guide them toward self-discipline. Some of these are:

- Spanking or other physical punishment. This will stop misbehavior momentarily, but it does not guide the child toward appropriate behavior. It teaches the child that hitting is an appropriate response to strong feelings.
- Threatening to withhold love. This can cause the child anxiety about rejection, and may not help the child learn acceptable behavior.
- Offering bribes. This does not help the child develop self-discipline.
- Asking the child to promise to behave. The child may be motivated to lie if he is unable to live up to his promise.
- Controlling the child through shame or guilt. This may only leave the child with a low self-esteem, and not guide the child toward acceptable behavior.<sup>13</sup>

### **Guidance Can Replace Punishment**

Try to understand reasons for the child's behavior. It may simply be curiosity about something rather than desire to be naughty. In this

case, an explanation, rather than punishment, can solve the problem.

Be sure that the child's environment encourages involvement in acceptable behavior. Play activity is important for the child's development. For this, children need space and appropriate play equipment.

Allow the child opportunities to contribute to the group or family by giving him responsibility for developmentally appropriate tasks. This helps the child develop self-confidence and self-discipline.

Remember that feelings of both children and adults are related to behavior. Try to understand these feelings and control your behavior. Talk about feelings with the child and guide her toward acceptable ways of expressing her feelings.

Your goal is to help your child become a self-disciplined person. To do this look for positive ways to guide the child. And try to always model personal self-disciplined behavior.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Thelma Harms, Ph.D. (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.) Lecture presented at the University of Florida on January 22, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>David B. Guralnik, ed. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980, pp. 401, 621, and 1152.

<sup>3</sup>Charlotte R. Wallinga and Anne L. Sweaney. "A Sense of Real Accomplishment," *Young Children*, Vol. 41, No. 1, November 1985, pp. 3-8.

<sup>4</sup>Delores Curran, *Stress and the Healthy Family*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, Inc., 1985, pp. 124-126.

<sup>5</sup>Stacie G. Gaffin and Claudia Q. Tull, "Encouraging Cooperative Behavior Among Young Children." *Dimensions*, Vol. 16, No. 4, July 1988, pp. 15-18.

<sup>6</sup>Harms, Lecture presented at the University of Florida, January 22, 1987.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Holly E. Brisbane, *The Developing Child: Understanding Children and Parenting*, Mission Hills, California: Glencoe Publishing Co., 1988, p. 288.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 432

<sup>11</sup>Katherine C. Kersey, *Sensitive Parenting: From Infancy to Adulthood*, Washington D.C.: Acropolis Books, Ltd., 1983, pp. 195-196.

<sup>12</sup>Brisbane, pp. 433-435.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 434-435.