

How do you define discipline?

Often when I talk about the benefits of shared power, connection, and problem solving, a parent will ask me, “Are you saying that we shouldn’t discipline our children?” or “Isn’t that undermining my authority?” Great questions.

Historically our parenting culture has equated discipline with punishment. The dictionary defines punishment as “the infliction or imposition of a penalty as retribution for an offense”. The dictionary even defines discipline as “using punishment to correct disobedience”. However it defines self-discipline as “train[ing] oneself to do something in a controlled and habitual way”. When you discipline yourself, do you inflict suffering or punishment? If so, does that work? A sacrifice is often necessary but only if you want a new habit more than you want the old one.

The derivation of the word discipline is “from the Latin disciplina ‘instruction, knowledge’” as in disciple. We know that to gain knowledge, children do best when they are fully engaged in experiential instruction—not the experience of isolated, reprimanded children with revoked privileges. A mother came into one of my weekly groups with an assignment from her five year old. He said, “Mom, ask your parenting group what you should do instead of sending me to my room when I’m bad, because it doesn’t work, you know. All it does is make me mad.” There is our lesson on punishment.

But if I don’t punish, how do I discipline? First we have to *de-define* discipline as punishment. Because it doesn’t work, you know. Here are some of the means of achieving positive discipline:

Modeling: Never was there a more effective method of teaching our children. How many of us practice what we preach? Or expect our children to do what we say, not what we do? Much of our so-called discipline techniques are disrespectful of children. So they learn well how to be disrespectful. How many of us get angry at our children when they don’t do what we want? So they learn well how anger gets what they want.

Connection: All of us do best when we feel understood. Our most effective tool for engaging children's cooperation is to let them know we understand—what they must have felt like in order to get to the point of hitting, how hurt they must be before shouting such words, BEFORE we get to what we want them to do differently. Blame breaks connection and incites anger and defensive reactions like lying, cheating, rebelling, and not taking responsibility for oneself.

Time in: Many children get wound up and get physical and can't find a way back to calm. Note the word is *can't*, not *won't*. At these times they need a calm, yet firm adult to meet them where they are and help them back down. Each child needs something different; some need holding, some need a more controlled way to get the rest of their energy out before they can calm.

Positive messages: Most parents spend a lot of time telling children, "Don't! Stop it! Why did you do that?! How many times do I have to tell you?!" This negative barrage leads to angry resistance or parent-deafness. Focus on what you want. "Coats belong on hooks. Milk belongs in the refrigerator." Or "What does your fist want to say? You want to stay, and I have to get you to school. How can we work this out for both of us?"

Logical Consequences: Now-a-days we are using the word consequence as the PC equivalent to punishment. A true consequence is a choice posed ahead of time to make it fair and logical. "I need to know your homework is done before bedtime. Do you want to do it before or after playing your video game? What should the consequence be if you get playing and forget about your homework?" Infractions that do not have consequences set up need to be thoroughly discussed by all who are affected by the actions (problem solving). Then set up a consequence if it happens again.

Problem Solving: This is more difficult than invoking punishments or withdrawing privileges. It means effort and involvement. It holds a child accountable unlike punishment, because the child is fully engaged in the process. It requires connection first so the child trusts she will not get in trouble and will have her point of view understood and heard. It means asking some form of the questions, How can you get what you want? How can you make that happen? How can we work this out so it

works for all of us? It's about balance, shared power (instead of holding power or giving it away) and creating a team with the parent always in charge.

Owning the Problem: This is about responsibility and establishes healthy parent/child boundaries. When I have a problem, i.e., a messy room, too much noise; being tired, anxious, worried, I own it and don't dump it on my child with blame for making me mad, upset, etc. And when my child has a problem, I don't fix it, take responsibility for it or rescue him. I understand that the problem is his so I can better help him through connection and problem solving, i.e. anger toward a sibling, homework not done, upset with a friend, etc.

All of these methods and more make up positive discipline and require the parent's self-discipline (see definition above) to practice them. None require punishment or blame. Positive discipline maintains the parent's authority because it is the parent who insures it is practiced at all times. And the best part is that it leads to respectful, responsible, self-disciplined children.