



# discipline without shouting, force or fluster

**Word of the Day: "Mondegreen":** mishearing phrases or lyrics. If you thought Creedance Clearwater Revival sang "There's a bathroom on the right" instead of "There's a bad moon on the rise", or thought Bob Dylan sang "Dead ants are my friends; they're blowin' in the wind", those are mondegreens.

'Discipline' can be a mondegreen. If I say "discipline", and you hear "Whacking, yelling, and making kids feel bad", then you've been mondegreened. When I say "discipline", I mean training – giving a child skills and self-control. It's helping a child to solve their own problems, think things through, and learn responsibility. Discipline is not something you do to your child because you are angry, but for them because you love them. In fact, if you are disciplining when you are angry, it probably isn't discipline at all – it's more likely to be revenge.

Another thing about discipline: discipline is everything you do as a parent, not just those interactions you have when your children are misbehaving. For discipline to actually be a loving, constructive thing, without shouting, force or fluster, then we need to build a whole scaffold of parenting practices, because good discipline only really works in a context of loving relationship. I like slogans, phrases that can stick in your head, and a key one for discipline is: "Rules without relationship leads to rebellion." If kids don't like and respect you, it is so much harder to make your rules and boundaries work. This is maybe why some step-parents really struggle with discipline. They may have successfully raised another family, and when they join a new family they think they can use the same discipline techniques that were effective with their other kids, but it often goes horribly wrong. There might not be anything wrong with the actual techniques, it is just that it takes years to build relationships up to the point where step-children will readily accept discipline from their step-parent. It is usually wiser for them to step back and support the 'bio-parent' in their discipline; instead, they should concentrate on building his or her relationships with the step-kids. The principle applies to all of us: the real key to good discipline is what you do when you are not actually disciplining: it's the communication, the respect, the love and the structure that creates the backdrop for effective discipline.

Good discipline always comes back to motive (love) and style. The style that makes discipline really work is "Firm, fair and friendly". Let's unpack that:

## **Firm... but not harsh.**

Parents do need to be assertive. At times we need to be more concerned about their character than their comfort. Sometimes we need to risk their displeasure and hold the line against their plaintive looks and temper. But we are not talking militaristic, authoritarian-style discipline; discipline is never rendered more effective by being harsh.

## **Fair... but not weak.**

Discipline needs to be reasonable, which means that we have to have good reasons for it. "Rules without reason lead to rebellion" is also worth printing on a tee-shirt, and less likely to give wrong messages than my earlier suggestion. As kids become capable of understanding them, we should give the reasons for the limits we set for them – they are to keep them safe, or to keep harmony in the home. Every one of our rules should be able to be prefixed with, "Because I love you...". "Because I love you, I don't want you climbing that high." "Because I love you, I don't want you playing with petrol and matches in the lounge". You wouldn't actually say "Because I love you..." every time you give a rule or limit (there is only so much syrup a child can stand), but it should be a test your rules could pass.

As kids move into the school age years, rules should be negotiable. If your rules are fair, and you are fair, you won't mind talking about them. The willingness to negotiate comes from being comfortable with your authority, not weakness. It is the rule that is being negotiated, not your parental authority. It is insecure parents who shout, "Just do it because I said so!!" A good response is always, "Convince me". If they can actually put together some good reasons why your rules could be modified, then why not agree and modify the rule.

*I take a step back, take a few deep breaths, and then try and respond more creatively.*

## **Friendly... but still as a parent.**

One of the things that I wish I had learnt earlier in my parenting journey is, 'Anger doesn't work! I must have an overactive grump gland, because when my kids annoy me my first response is to give them the Rottwieler response: all snarls and growls. But my anger never seems to work; anger never delivers the results I want it to. Very seldom, after telling my kids off, do they come back to me and say, "Thank-you for that telling off, Dad. That's just what we needed to correct us and set us back on to the straight path." If I use anger in my voice, then it doesn't matter how right I am and how wrong they are, they won't be getting the point. They won't hear my words, they will just feel my heat. Sometimes it will bring out the fight in them, other times it will crush them down; either way, the relationship is dented and the lesson has been lost.

So what does a grumpy old man like myself do with his anger? I am grateful for an experience I had years ago, when I worked as a scientist at a hospital. I was belting down a corridor, ran around a corner and collided with a nurse. "Only run for fire and haemorrhages!" she scolded me. I thought, "What

wise advice! I'm going to apply that wherever I can." If I discover the kids doing something that really gets up my nose, I ask myself "Is there smoke? Is there blood? No? Then I don't have to respond immediately." I know that if I respond in the first roaring surge of anger, I'll regret it. I take a step back, take a few deep breaths, and then try and respond more creatively. I've learnt to use phrases like, "Pop down to your bedroom kids – you might be safer there." The pause gives me a chance to cool down and get a sense of perspective – I can think past beyond my initial assumptions. "They've broken it – but was it vandalism or just an accident?" "I feel offended, but was it their intention to insult me?" The slow-down-and-think approach works for me, and my kids would like to hug that nurse. I think getting a grip on my anger is helping me to coach my kids to handle theirs. They got their temper from my genes, but hopefully they will get the controls for it from my example. I'll be so mad at them if they don't.

And so a friendly tone really does work well, even in discipline. But, remember you are still the parent. We are friendly and loving, but not 'chummy': we still have to hold them to account if they have done something wrong.

## What's really going on?

Here's another one of those phrases: "A child who feels right, acts right". All children will spontaneously throw up a bit of mischief, but if you are constantly being confronted with difficult, uncooperative, unpleasant behaviour, then see it is a symptom. "A child who feels right acts, right, and my child's behaviour is terrible, so why aren't they feeling right?" You have to step back and get a bigger picture of the behaviour, to see not just the 'offence' but the reasons behind it. What lies behind this behaviour? Are they being picked on at school? Are they getting too tired? Is there sibling rivalry? Are they unwell? Do they feel they aren't getting enough attention? When they are older you might have to ask, are there drugs involved? This probably doesn't mean that you 'go soft' on the actual instances of misbehaviour, but it does give you with a better tool for getting things back on track.

Topping up their 'emotional tank' helps to prevent misbehaviour: plenty of time, attention, touch and affection. Sometimes, if there has been a string of challenging incidents, rather than simply escalating the punishments, it might be more appropriate to call a truce and head off for a fishing trip!

### A, B and C comes before D

People often sign up for Parents Inc's 'Teens and Tween' Toolbox courses to get practical discipline techniques, and some of them may feel impatient when they see the course outline, because it looks like the topic of Discipline doesn't get covered until the fourth session. Toolbox follows an ABC format, so Atmosphere, Boundaries and Communication get covered before you get to Discipline. "I didn't come for that other stuff! I want discipline techniques! I want to learn how to use electric cattle-prods and drugs I can put in their cereal!" In actual fact, if you get the atmosphere in the home right, and establish wise boundaries in an effective way, and have good communication, then discipline just happens! In a real sense, if you get the ABC right, you've already got D.

### Atmosphere

How does your home make your children feel? Is there enough fun? Do they know they are loved and supported? Do they have space and down time? Is



there a sense of 'team'? What is your family's culture around disappointments and failures? Is there a lingering atmosphere of anger in the air?

### Boundaries

Here's a good backbone to hang your family rules on

- Care for others (rules around hitting, harsh words, cooperation, manners etc)
- Care for yourself (rules around safety)
- Care for things (rules around caring for property)

It is very hard to be consistent, especially with a range of ages and maturities in your family. Rules do need to be linked to maturity – older children can have a wider range of liberties just because they have the ability to handle them. This may seem unfair to younger sibling, but it is perfectly reasonable if love really is the reason for the rules.

As well as the rules, children need to understand the consequences. Consequences are not what you do to them, but rather what they automatically bring upon themselves if they do certain things. Consequences don't need to be harsh penalties, but they do need to be reliable! Consequences can be natural (e.g. if they carelessly break a toy, then they no longer have that toy to play with) or they can be logical (e.g. if they carelessly break a toy, they don't get to play with any toys until tomorrow). Consequences might be things like losing privileges such as TV and internet time or their pocket money. If they keep you waiting ten minutes when you are wanting to depart, they can go to bed that many minutes earlier.

### Communication

Hard, hot, uncomfortable emotions crop up every so often in our children. If we disregard them and basically tell children to suppress them, then those emotions will boil up into negative behaviours. The misbehaviours that we think need discipline might never occur if the hot emotions and resentments that triggered them were properly processed. And the best way to process them is to hear them expressed, realising that children sometimes express their hard emotions loudly, awkwardly, inappropriately and sometime offensively. All emotions are permissible, but not all actions. Angry feelings do not give us permission to hit or be cruel.

The secret to communication is not what we say to them, but rather listening to what they say. Reflective listening involves interpreting back to the child what you think they said, helping them name their feelings. Phrases like, "You sound really cross," and "That must be really disappointing" can be useful, but one of the most valuable things you can say is "Mmmmmn", preferably with a slightly constipated look of patient concern on your face. Your understanding, sympathetic comments diffuse and dilute the emotions, whereas arguing

against them will just stoke the fire. Accepting their feelings is accepting them. What can derail the process is 'solving' problems for them too quickly. With your emotional support, they are very likely to solve things themselves.

## A pattern for changing behaviour

### Practise behaviour that you do want

If your child does something the wrong way, get them to do it again the right way. If they ask you something in a whiney, grizzly voice, say, "Pop down to your bedroom and pick up your nice voice and your manners, and come back and ask me again". Or if they are slow to respond to your call, when they finally do arrive, send them back and then call them again. Do it again several times, turning it into a fun race against the clock. Drop your voice down, quieter and quieter, while complimenting them on how fast they are getting. We don't expect children to be like performing seals, jumping through hoops at the snap of a finger, but reasonable compliance to reasonable requests is... well... reasonable.

### Praise when they do it right

When I was studying psychology, we had rat labs. I was given Arthur Rat ("R for Rat"), who would sit morosely and glower at me with his red eyes. I think he knew that after the Psych students finished with him the Med students would get him. However, Arthur did eventually become a prize-winning maze-runner and button-pusher. (Which really didn't do him a lot of good, because he still ended up being dissected by Med students. Que sera sera.) Ultimately, Arthur was able to demonstrate to me that positive reinforcement (reward) was a powerful way to shape behaviour. As a father my knee-jerk tendency would have been to use punishment more readily than rewards with my children. Perhaps it is because punishment better suits the emotion I feel when my children annoy and exasperate me. But Arthur's enduring legacy has been to convince me that discipline works better when complemented with rewards and encouragements. You displace the bad behaviour by encouraging good behaviour, rather than just eliminating bad behaviour with punishment.

Praise and rewards have their limitations too. Our children are not rats. We can create self-esteem junkies. We can also create 'economic compliance' where they will only do the right thing if there is a reward for it.

Possibly the nicest positive encouragement is your gratitude. Heart-felt thanks rather than over-sugared praise or rewards will have a powerful effect.

Arthur taught me a little more basic psychology: if certain behaviour delivers desirable consequences, that behaviour will keep on happening. So why do children continue to sulk, pout, fight, whine, bully, lie and throw tantrums? Because these behaviours work! So, when you are confronted by misbehaviour, ask yourself, "What's the pay-off?" It may be that we inadvertently reward their misbehaviour by giving into them or making them the centre of attention. The simple message is: remove the pay-off and the behaviour will reduce. Of course the complex message is, again, children are not rats. This rat-lab psychology has to be filtered through our very human hearts and wisdom.

## The heat is on!

Okay, that's the ground work – what do I actually do when the proverbial hits the fan?

**Safety First** Intervene for physical fighting, and stop inappropriate behaviour, especially if it is dangerous. Of course there is a time for talking, but there is also a very real time for action. A little homily on playing nicely is not the right thing when big brother is clubbing little brother with a stick.

**Pause if you can** The 'fire and haemorrhages' thing. Cool yourself down, and think through what you intend to do. "Is this firm, fair and friendly? Can I actually carry through with what I am about to say?"

**Distraction** Use distraction if tempers are fraying and you can see a little person starting to wind up. Divert them to another task. "Come and help me for a while" can be nice way to give them a break. The aim is to reset their emotions.

**Time-out** Books have been written on time out techniques (including some excellent ones). I think time-out saves kids lives, because it is not just the kids that are cooling down, it's the parents as well. The "stand and think" corner technique worked well at our place. We turned confrontation into problem solving: after the initial heat had gone, we would ask "What do you have to do to get out of the corner?" Their energy then went into solving the problem rather than battling us.

**Walking Away** If attention rewards behaviour, remove the reward. "When you are ready..."

**Prompt** Sometimes we dilute the power of our words by using too many of them... it soon turns into nagging and lecturing. Have more power through fewer words. Make it your goal to be able to dehydrate requests down to a single word. "Door." "Shoes." Better still, learn to say it with your eyebrows!

**Anticipate a trigger** Tiredness, hunger, sugar and a disrupted routine can release the monster in even normally placid kids. Planning ahead can mean that kids can handle disruptions and the stress of outings better because they are rested, fed, and primed with instructions.

**Stern face and voice** Let's face it: discipline will occasionally mean they have to experience your displeasure. Scolding and a stern face works, but only if they see it seldom. Use it all the time and it will have no effect apart from them thinking you are a grump.

**Model the behaviour you want your children to copy** Albert Schweitzer said, "There are three ways to teach your child: first, by example; second, by example; third, by example". How do they see you in conflict? Do they see you saying sorry? Do they see you taking responsibility for your own mess and your own emotions?

Because example is so potent and important, it allows me to finish this article on a very encouraging note: if you are the type of person that would read an article on parenting all the way through to the end, you are obviously motivated and care about your kids. I have no doubt you will have a few hiccoughs on the way, but with attitudes like that, I'm sure you and your kids will do just fine!

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