

**Disciplinary Practices, Parenting Styles, and  
The Development of Self-Discipline**

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Dr. Sam Goldstein and I recently completed the manuscript for our newest book, *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child: Help Your Child to Become More Responsible, Confident, and Resilient*, to be published next fall by McGraw-Hill. The book focuses on the application of disciplinary practices that promote self-discipline, responsibility, and resilience rather than anger and resentment in children. While we have highlighted the close link between self-discipline and resilience in several of our earlier writings, it was our belief that a book devoted exclusively to examining disciplinary practices and the emergence of self-discipline was warranted. This belief is constantly reinforced by the many questions that are posed about discipline in our clinical practices and workshops.

In preparing and reflecting upon the manuscript, Sam and I came to appreciate even more strongly the impact of self-discipline on our lives. Consequently, we decided that we would co-author several articles based upon our new book to appear on both of our websites. In this article, we describe the essential role of self-discipline in a child's life and the different forms of disciplinary techniques applied by parents.

**The Power of Self-Discipline**

The need to develop and harness self-discipline at an early age, while critical in any culture, may take on greater importance in a society filled with complex demands, challenges, and stresses. When self-discipline is effectively learned during childhood, there is a greater likelihood of successful coping and accomplishment in adulthood. Thus, it is not surprising that in our fast paced, often chaotic world, children capable of implementing self-discipline at young ages appear to negotiate the maze of family, school, friends, and community more successfully than those who struggle with this ability. Effective self-discipline implies that a child has internalized a set of rules so that even without the presence of a parent or other caregiver, the child will act in a thoughtful, reflective manner.

Self-discipline can be understood as a vital component of a sense of ownership and responsibility for one's behavior. A large body of research has demonstrated that

children capable of resisting temptation—a simple example of self-discipline at all ages—fare significantly better than their more impulsive peers as they transition into their adolescent years. For example, one research team demonstrated that a preschool child’s ability to resist an attractive snack when requested to do so was a significant predictor of a host of positive outcomes in adolescence, including school success, mental health, and avoiding the juvenile justice system. The power of self-discipline to impact on the course of a child and adult’s life should never be underestimated.

In previous books we have suggested that parents who raise resilient youngsters follow a blueprint of important principles, ideas, and actions. They recognize that a primary goal in all of their interactions with their children is to nurture a resilient mindset that includes a number of important qualities and skills including: learning to communicate, being empathic, dealing constructively with both successes and setbacks, identifying and reinforcing one’s strengths or “islands of competence” while not avoiding problematic areas, possessing problem-solving and decision-making skills, developing a social conscience, and contributing to the welfare of others. In writing about these qualities, we have not only defined the steps necessary for parents and other caregivers to successfully implement the teaching of these skills, but we have also identified the obstacles that often prevent adults from assisting children to develop these skills.

We have come to realize that among the most significant of these obstacles is when children lack self-discipline and parents are at a loss as to how to instill this quality in their children. In fact, all of the other attributes of resilience are compromised if children lack the necessary self-discipline to put them into effective practice. That is, knowing what to do (e.g., considering different options before taking action) does not guarantee that children will do what they know (e.g., actually considering these different options) in the absence of self-discipline to do so.

Unfortunately, in our experience we have found that many people offer facile excuses for poor self-discipline, failing to appreciate that the ability to honestly appraise one’s decisions and their outcomes as well as to learn from them is a key component to living a resilient, self-disciplined life.

Experienced teachers recognize the importance of self-discipline. Neil Abrahams, a mathematics teacher in the Houston School District, writes, “Teachers need to be able

to count on students' self-discipline if they are to succeed. Yet America's youth culture and consumerism hinder the development of the self-discipline that is necessary for learning." Abrahams hypothesizes that self-discipline may be more responsible for differences in achievement than any other factor. We agree with his assertion.

Writing in the *Australian* on June 14, 2006, Cordelia Fine, a Research Fellow at the Center for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne in Australia, describes the work of Amelia Duckworth and Martin Seligman published in the *Journal of Psychological Science*. Fine notes the authors' conclusions:

"Underachievement among American youth is often blamed on inadequate teachers, boring textbooks, and large class sizes. We suggest another reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential: their failure to exercise self-discipline. We believe that many of America's children have trouble making choices that require them to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain and that programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement."

In the fall of a recent school year, Duckworth and Seligman evaluated 140 eighth grade students. Each was given an I.Q. test. Then they, their parents, and teachers answered questionnaires about self-discipline. Are you good at resisting temptation? Can you work effectively towards long-term goals? Do pleasure and fun sometimes keep you from getting work done? The students were also given a real-life test of their ability to delay gratification. Each was handed a dollar bill in an envelope. They could choose either to keep it or hand it back and get two dollars a week later. Their decision was carefully recorded.

In the spring of that school year, Duckworth and Seligman returned to this group of students. They took note of each student's grades and compared grades to the data they collected in the previous fall. They wanted to identify the most important factors influencing school achievement and grades. They discovered that by far the best predictor of grades was self-discipline. Each student's capacity for self-discipline was twice as important as his or her I.Q. when it came to predicting academic success. Self-discipline was also the most powerful variable in predicting high school selection, school attendance, hours spent doing homework, hours watching television (inversely), and the time of day students began their homework. The effect of self-discipline on final grades

held consistent even when controlling for first marking period grades, achievement test scores, and, as noted, measured I.Q.

### **Parenting Styles and Disciplinary Practices**

We are aware that the temperament and cognitive styles of some youngsters from birth make it more difficult for them to develop self-discipline than their peers. However, even considering the noticeable influence of these innate factors on a child's functioning, we must appreciate the vital role that caregivers assume in nurturing self-discipline in children. All children need adults in their lives who will assist them to think before they act, to reflect upon various options to challenging situations, to realize that different consequences follow from their choices, and to take responsibility for their behavior.

It is our strong belief that disciplinary practices that are based upon a resilience model (i.e., practices that reinforce the characteristics of a resilient mindset) will prove to be the most beneficial in supporting the emergence of self-discipline. Adults must keep in mind that discipline derives from the word disciple and is best understood as a teaching process. As a form of education, children should not associate discipline with intimidation, humiliation, or embarrassment.

If discipline is placed in the context of an educational process, parents can ponder, "What are the main goals of discipline?" While many answers may be forthcoming, we believe that discipline has two major functions. The first is to ensure that children have a consistent, safe, and secure environment in which they can learn reasonable rules, limits, and consequences as well as develop an understanding of why these are important. The second function, equally important but not as readily emphasized, is to nurture self-discipline or self-control.

We have found that many parents, some who are well-intended, may not demonstrate behavior to nurture self-discipline in their children. When parents are reactive, crisis-oriented, overly punitive, harsh, belittling, arbitrary, or inconsistent, the positive goals of discipline are likely to suffer. The development of self-discipline is also compromised when parents have very different disciplinary styles or when parents are hesitant to set limits for fear that their children will be angry with them; some children take advantage of this fear by telling parents they don't love them when consequences are enacted. Finally, children will struggle to develop self-discipline when parents impose

unrealistic expectations for behavior, resulting in children becoming increasingly frustrated and angry.

Psychologists and other child development specialists have examined the impact of different parenting and disciplinary styles on children. Diana Baumrind distinguished three major styles, which we outline below.

**Authoritative:** These parents demonstrate warmth and involvement with their children. They offer emotional support, but are also firm in establishing guidelines, limits and expectations. They listen actively to their children and encourage them to make their own decisions. When appropriate, they involve their children in the process of creating rules and consequences so that their children learn to understand and appreciate the rationale for rules. They focus on positive feedback rather than on punishment. Very importantly, authoritative parents recognize that discipline is most effective when housed in the context of a loving relationship. Also, the love shown is unconditional and not based on the child performing or behaving in a particular manner.

**Authoritarian:** Although the words authoritative and authoritarian sound similar, the parenting styles that are associated with each are very different. Authoritarian parents are frequently not warm nor nurturing. They do not easily take their children's feelings into consideration and tend to be more rigid, imposing rules without discussing the rationale with their children. They are quick to say, "You do it because I told you to do it" or "You do it because I'm your mother (or father)." They resort to authority and whether they realize it or not, they basically seek compliance and obedience. Authoritarian parents may certainly show love, but more often than not it is conditional, predicated on a child behaving in ways that parents deem appropriate. Authoritarian parents are likely to resort to corporal punishment rather than a problem-solving approach when they feel their children are not complying with their demands and/or have transgressed in some fashion.

**Permissive:** These parents are most noted for their failure to establish realistic goals, expectations, and limits for their children. Baumrind identified two kinds of permissive parents, the *permissive-indulgent* and the *disengaged*. Permissive-indulgent parents may demonstrate love and warmth, but they appear guided by the philosophy that "children will learn on their own." They have difficulty setting rules and limits. The

child begins to “rule the roost.” If parents eventually attempt to establish limits and say “no.” the child will often resist, having become accustomed to being in charge. It is not unusual for the parents to become exhausted and eventually defer to their child’s demands.

*Disengaged* parents do not indulge their children but rather fail to provide structure and emotional nourishment. They are often neglectful. The attachment between parent and child is tenuous at best. The positive connections that serve as the foundation for emotional development and well-being are absent.

In his book *How to Handle a Hard-to-Handle Kid* psychologist Dr. C. Drew Edwards summarizes outcome research associated with these different parenting styles. He notes, “Children of authoritative parents tend to have healthy self-esteem, positive peer relationships, self-confidence, independence, and school success. They also seem to have fewer emotional difficulties than people who are raised with other styles of parenting. These children cope well with stress, strive toward goals, and balance self-control with curiosity and interest in a variety of situations.”

Authoritative parents are not only the most effective disciplinarians in promoting self-discipline when compared with the other disciplinary styles, but in addition they are more likely to nurture a resilient, hopeful mindset in their children.

The outcome for children raised by authoritarian parents is in marked contrast to those growing up in households of authoritative parents. Edwards observes, “Research has shown that children of authoritarian parents may become inhibited, fearful, withdrawn, and at increased risk for depression. They also may have a difficult time making decisions for themselves, since they’re used to being told what to do. Authoritarian parents don’t tolerate much disagreement, so their children tend to struggle with independence.”

Edwards states that while some children of authoritarian parents are seemingly well-behaved and present themselves as “good” children, others begin to resist the demands of their parents and a negative, angry parent-child cycle dominates.

Children raised by permissive-indulgent parents are described by Edwards as classic “spoiled” children. “They tend to be noncompliant with other adults. They are demanding, low in self-reliance, and lack self-control. They don’t set goals or enjoy

responsible activities. They may be pleasant and well behaved as long as things are going their way, but become frustrated when their desires aren't met."

The disengaged style "seems to have the most negative effect upon children. These children are at high risk for emotional and behavioral problems, academic difficulties, low self-esteem, and alcohol or substance abuse." It is little surprise to learn about this outcome for children with disengaged, neglectful parents since they have failed to experience unconditional love and acceptance.

As you reflect upon these different disciplinary styles, consider which style best describes the one you use with your children. Ask, "Is my style closest to an authoritative approach? If not, what must I do to become an authoritative parent?" Your answers to these questions and the subsequent actions you take will be very influential in determining the ease with which your children develop self-discipline and lead a resilient lifestyle.

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