

Friendships and Self-Discipline:

A Two-Way Street

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As I noted in my December, 2006 website article, 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 this fall by McGraw-Hill. In preparing and reflecting upon the manuscript, Sam and I came to appreciate even more strongly the impact of self-discipline on our lives and on our ability to deal with challenges and be resilient. Consequently, we decided that we would co-author several articles based upon principles described in our new book that would appear on both of our websites. In this article, we describe the essential connection between self-discipline and friendships.

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Self-Discipline and the Demands of Our Society

In our December article we emphasized that the need to develop and effectively harness self-discipline at any age, while critical in all societies, takes on greater relevance in a society replete with complex demands, challenges, and stresses. The possession of and ability to effectively utilize self-discipline paves a successful road into adulthood. Thus, it is not surprising that in our fast-paced, seemingly chaotic world children capable of implementing self-discipline at a young age appear to negotiate the maze of family, school, friends, and community more successfully than those who struggle with self-control. 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 lack of self-discipline impacts all areas of our lives, not the least of which are our interpersonal relationships. This impact is demonstrated by the experiences of nine-year-old Alex who wanders the playground during recess. Intermittently he makes rather forceful attempts to join the activities of others. He approaches a group of boys playing soccer, runs up to the ball, and kicks it away. One of the other children pushes him and tells him to go away. He wanders off, feeling confused, angry, and sad.

Alex experiences this type of scenario repeatedly on the playground, in the classroom, and even in his home with siblings. In our clinical work, it is the rule rather than the exception that impulsive, poorly self-disciplined children struggle with peer relationships. Interestingly, many of these youngsters often know what to do but don't use this knowledge in a consistent, predictable, and independent way. After the fact, many of these youngsters can identify more effective ways of interacting with their peers, but unfortunately, their impulsivity and limited capacity to reflect upon the details of the social situation eventuates in behaviors that are counterproductive and lead to peer rejection rather than peer acceptance.

For years we subscribed to the view that the source of their socialization problem was what might be termed uni-directional—that is, the child's poor self-discipline was at the root of his or her behaving in ways that precluded the development of satisfying friendships. However, we now believe that this uni-directional perspective is too narrow and does not capture the full picture. Social rejection as described in Alex's situation often elicits negative emotions and a negative perception of self. In turn, this negativity may trigger angry, aggressive, and out-of-control behavior, setting in motion a vicious cycle of poor self-discipline, rejection, loneliness, and anger. This broader view, which has significant implications for intervention strategies, suggests that the relationship between self-discipline and appropriate social interaction is a two-way street with each influencing the other. In fact, it is our opinion that loneliness in children quickly leads to sadness, which then sets the foundation for angry, poorly self-disciplined actions.

Social Interactions and Self-Discipline: A Complex Relationship

Efforts at evaluating risk factors that might lead to anger and a lack of self-discipline in youth (e.g., those who display violent outbursts in school) find a consistent, common theme, namely, that these youth are socially isolated, unconnected to peers in their educational settings, and in many cases bullied. For a number of years psychologist Dr. Roy Baumeister and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University have evaluated the effects of social rejection on self-discipline.

Baumeister found that social rejection is not simply a product of limited self-discipline skills, but that social rejection actually serves to undermine self-regulation and self-discipline, increasing the likelihood of angry, negative behaviors. Not surprisingly, he also found that there

is a significant component of altruism and empathy required for pro-social behavior. When social connections are absent, empathy, altruism, and self-discipline all suffer. As Baumeister points out, even if a child has developed the capacity for self-discipline, the experience of social exclusion may undermine the use of self-control and the display of appropriate behaviors with others. In the model proposed by Baumeister, the relationship between poor social relationships and self-discipline is not as simple as “a lack of self-discipline results in behaviors that lead to negative interactions with others.” Rather, when children are confronted by social rejection, they are vulnerable to engaging in impulsive, self-centered, poorly regulated, and at times destructive behaviors.

If children who were not prone towards a pattern of poor self-discipline manifest this behavior in the face of social rejection, it would appear that children with existing self-discipline problems are at even greater risk for loneliness and anger. This latter group often finds themselves trapped in a vicious cycle in which social relations suffer, leading to further dissolution of self-discipline and self-regulation. This pattern, for example, has been observed repeatedly in research with children with a diagnosis of ADHD.

In another series of studies, Baumeister applied two basic manipulations to explore social rejection in adults. In the first, a small group of individuals were brought together for a brief discussion. At the end of the discussion participants were asked to privately name one other participant with whom they would like to continue working. In the social acceptance condition the researchers then told participants that all of the other participants chose them. In the social rejection condition they told participants that none chose them. In the second manipulation participants were given personality tests and told either that people with their profiles tended to be surrounded by friends as they grow older or that people with their profiles tended to become increasingly isolated.

The results were intriguing. People who were in the “socially rejected” group demonstrated higher levels of antisocial and self-defeating self-reports than those who were in the “socially accepted” group. Baumeister’s experiments revealed that social rejection renders people more vulnerable to aggression. It also makes them more likely to cheat, place risky bets, procrastinate, and struggle to delay gratification and less likely to help others and choose healthy behaviors. All of these activities are in part driven by poor self-discipline. The data further

suggested that people who were rejected also scored lower on an intelligence measure! Social exclusion appears to produce significant adverse changes in behavior leading to a variety of maladaptive, pathological, and undesirable patterns.

Implications for Interventions

Baumeister's findings have noteworthy implications when planning interventions to assist youngsters such as Alex to have more satisfying relationships on the playground and in other areas of their lives. Obviously a major goal would be to help Alex develop self-discipline, but at the same time he should be afforded opportunities that nurture social skills and social acceptance. Both of these goals—reinforcing self-discipline and social skills—complement each other. The less lonely and angry Alex is, the more receptive he will be to learning self-control. The more self-control he demonstrates, the more likely he is to learn social skills that will lead to genuine friendships.

In *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child* we describe a number of strategies for reinforcing self-discipline. One of the interventions involves teaching children how to solve problems and is based on the work of our friend and colleague Dr. Myrna Shure. Myrna developed the “I Can Problem Solve” program, which is outlined in her books *Raising a Thinking Child* and *Raising a Thinking Preteen*. Children such as Alex can be taught to identify problems and consider different options for managing these problems. Very importantly, they can also be taught techniques to remember and apply self-discipline and social skills in challenging situations.

As an example, six-year-old Danny desperately wanted to have friends. However, his desperation coupled with his impulsivity led to behaviors that were counterproductive and alienated him from his peers. He would abruptly hug his classmates and sometimes rub his hand through their hair. In an interview he acknowledged that he knew he shouldn't engage in these behaviors, but he would “forget.” He poignantly said, “I'll never have any friends.”

When asked what he thought might help, he responded, “I need reminders,” a word he had heard from his parents. This led to a meeting with his teacher during which Danny was able to suggest the reminder that the teacher could use. He noticed that the teacher often walked around the classroom and would place her hand on the shoulder of students as a sign of support and encouragement. He said, “When you put your hand on my shoulder it will remind me not to hug other kids.”

The teacher complimented Danny on his suggestion. The only change that was necessary was how often Danny thought his teacher should remind him. It started at every 30 minutes, but after the first day Danny requested the reminders be offered every 10 minutes. His teacher agreed and the reminders proved very successful.

The teacher also recognized the need for Danny to learn to relate with his peers in a more age appropriate manner so that friendships might be nurtured. She skillfully paired Danny with different classmates in certain activities, carefully planning and supervising the activity, whether it be completing a puzzle or doing a poster or helping to clean up part of the room. The teacher he had in second grade continued these practices, but introduced another way in which Danny could contribute to his school. Since Danny liked to draw, she arranged for him to go to the first grade classroom on a regular basis to help a younger child with his drawings, a situation that was closely supervised to ensure success. Assisting a younger child served several purposes. It enhanced Danny's self-esteem and also allowed him to strengthen both his self-discipline and social skills as he patiently showed the younger child what to do.

Concluding Remarks

If we are to enrich the lives of children who struggle with self-discipline, we must appreciate the impact that poor social skills, loneliness, rejection, and anger have on a child's ability to gain self-control. An intervention plan to develop self-discipline that is narrow in focus will not be effective if other dimensions of a child's life are ignored. It is for this reason that in *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child* we describe the importance of having available a number of strategies to be used in concert, especially those that not only teach youngsters to think before they act, but also strengthen their interpersonal abilities and friendships, thereby decreasing their sense of loneliness, despair, and anger. The emergence of both self-discipline and social skills is crucial if children are to develop a resilient lifestyle dominated by feelings of compassion, satisfaction, happiness, and fulfillment.