

Raising a Self-Disciplined Child:

An Excerpt, Part I

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Dr. Sam Goldstein and I co-authored three website articles during this past school year in anticipation of the publication of our newest book, *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child: Help Your Child to Become More Responsible, Confident, and Resilient*, published by McGraw-Hill. We are pleased to announce that the book is now available. In our previous articles we addressed such themes as: (a) the significance of self-discipline throughout the lifespan, (b) different parenting and disciplinary styles, (c) the influence of self-discipline on friendships, and (d) the importance of adopting a preventive disciplinary approach, such as by enlisting children to help others.

Not surprisingly, in our parenting workshops we are asked many questions pertaining to discipline. We have heard strikingly diverse opinions from parents about what they consider to be the most effective disciplinary techniques. Also, many parents voice confusion and doubt about their disciplinary practices. The interest, varying viewpoints, and confusion expressed by parents (and professionals) served as one catalyst for us to devote an entire book to the subject of discipline. In *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child* our goal was to convey a strength-based perspective in which discipline is cast as a significant contributor to the emergence of self-discipline, respect, and resilience rather than anger and resentment.

The release of *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child* has prompted us to excerpt a brief section of the book in our website articles for this month and next month. Our purpose is to provide an example of the different views that parents hold about discipline and to illustrate the ways in which we engage parents to consider and adopt a disciplinary style that is guided by the concepts of respect, love, and resilience. We hope you find this excerpt helpful as you reflect upon your own disciplinary beliefs and practices.

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The Role of Parents

To nurture the development of self-discipline in their children, parents have a key ingredient to contribute: discipline. One of the most important roles that parents play is that of disciplinarian. However, parents fulfill this role in vastly different ways, as the following examples illustrate.

Among the participants in a parenting workshop we offered were two couples: Bill and Samantha Ewing and Tom and Jennifer Franklin. Each of the couples had three children, and in both families, the oldest child was a twelve-year-old boy. As these parents described their twelve-year-olds, we suspected that both boys had been born with more challenging or “difficult” temperaments. Compared with their younger siblings, they were harder to soothe, more irritable and argumentative, and less likely to be cooperative, especially when they felt frustrated.

A lively discussion ensued when the topic turned to disciplinary practices. Bill Ewing stated, “The only thing that Jim responds to is a spanking. You can try to reason with him for hours, and he will wear you down. He never does what you ask. There’s always an argument. When I spank him on the rear, it gets him to do what I want. I don’t have to spank my other kids, because they do what Samantha and I ask them to do. I guess the only way some kids learn is if you spank them. To be honest my parents spanked me, and I turned out OK.” As Bill said this, we couldn’t help but notice the anger in his voice.

His wife, Samantha, added, “While Bill grew up in a home where his parents spanked him, my parents never spanked me. Before we had kids, I would have sworn that I would never yell or spank my kids, but having Jim changed all of that. I have to agree with Bill that Jim only seems to respond to being spanked. The only thing that bothers me is that we’ve been spanking him for years and he keeps doing the same things. He’s almost a teenager. I’m not sure if we can keep spanking him much longer.”

Jennifer Franklin jumped into the discussion. “My parents spanked me, just as Bill’s parents spanked him. I really don’t think it did much good. I still resent what they did. I know I wasn’t the easiest kid, but each time they spanked me, I became angrier. To this day, I don’t have a very good relationship with them. I must admit that when Stevie was born, there were times I really felt like hitting him. He made me so mad. But each time I came close to slapping

him or was ready to yell at him, I thought back to what my parents had done to me. I didn't want Stevie to feel about me the way I felt about my parents."

Tom Franklin added, "I feel the same way my wife does. We've read a number of books about raising kids, but even without the books, we know that Stevie was born more difficult to raise. We've spent hours thinking and talking about how to deal with him. We know we have to maintain authority as his parents. We know that some things are nonnegotiable. But we've found that if we select our battlegrounds carefully, if we give him some choice in certain matters, if we speak to him calmly, he's more reasonable and more cooperative when we ask him to do certain things. It's still a struggle at times, but things are going more smoothly, and there are fewer outbursts."

Upon hearing Tom's observations, Bill replied, "I'm glad how you've handled Stevie has worked, but it would never work for Jim. He only understands one thing: that when we spank him, we mean business and he'd better listen to us."

Applying the Purpose of Discipline

The Ewings and Franklins both believed they were effective disciplinarians, but their approaches contrasted sharply. Reflect for a moment on your feelings about discipline. Which approach feels most comfortable to you? Which approach do you think would work best for your child or children?

As parents consider an array of disciplinary practices, they often ask us, "What are the best ways of disciplining children?" We prefer to reframe this question by first reminding parents of the meaning of the word *discipline*. Discipline derives from the word *disciple* and is best understood as a teaching process. To recognize discipline as a form of education, children should not associate it with intimidation, humiliation, or embarrassment.

Placing discipline in the context of an educational process, parents can ponder the main goals of discipline. Many goals are possible, but 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.

Applying discipline to teach self-discipline is often a challenging task. As with other human qualities or traits, children come to the world with different predispositions and capacities. Some children easily develop self-discipline, while others struggle. Some children are responsive to discipline, able to shift their behavior quickly after a single negative experience or disciplinary intervention, while others struggle. Still, in either case, we want children to incorporate rather than dismiss or resent what we are trying to teach them.

Given these two functions of discipline, parents may wonder: “What skills must I possess to be an effective disciplinarian?” “What skills should I try to teach my children in order to nurture self-discipline?” In response to the first question, we believe that disciplinary practices are most constructive when parents display empathy, good communication skills, the ability to change when their parenting activities are negative, an appreciation of each child’s unique temperament, and realistic goals for their children.

However, we have found that many well-meaning parents do not demonstrate these qualities, so they fail 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. Ironically, when parents resort to screaming or hitting (as in the case of the Ewings spanking their son), they are actually displaying the very behaviors they wish to stop in their children, serving instead as models of poor self-discipline.

The development of self-discipline is also compromised when the parents have very different disciplinary styles or when parents hesitate to set limits for fear that their children will be angry with them. (Some children take advantage of this fear by reacting to consequences with the claim, “You don’t love me!”) Finally, children will have difficulty developing self-discipline when parents impose unrealistic expectations for behavior; these children instead become increasingly frustrated and angry.

Developing Self-Discipline: Focus on Mindsets and Solutions

The question, “What skills and attitudes are we trying to reinforce in children when we discipline them?” can also be posed in the following way: “What do we want to be the end result of our disciplinary techniques?” We believe the answer may be found within a concept we proposed in *Raising Resilient Children*: a resilient mindset. A resilient mindset consists of assumptions and attitudes about ourselves that support the development of behaviors and skills

that make us more resilient. In turn, our behaviors and skills influence our set of assumptions, so a dynamic process is constantly operating.

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We will continue this excerpt next month, but we would encourage you to consider the following questions before the next installment:

If one of the main goals of discipline is to nurture a resilient mindset, what would you list as the main characteristics of such a mindset?

What disciplinary techniques are most likely to nurture these characteristics in children?

What disciplinary techniques are most likely to work against the development of a resilient mindset?

If you subscribe to the belief that a major goal of discipline is to promote self-discipline and a resilient mindset, what observations and suggestions would you offer the Ewings who were experiencing a great deal of difficulty and frustration with their son Jim?

If you were the Ewings, how might you change your disciplinary approach?

We will respond to these questions in next month's article.

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