

Engaging Children in “Contributory Activities”:

A Preventive Disciplinary Approach

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As Dr. Sam Goldstein and I noted in our joint December, 2006 and February, 2007 website articles, we 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 reflecting upon the ideas conveyed in this book, 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 month’s article, we describe the importance of a preventive approach to discipline with a focus on providing all children and adolescents, but especially those who are easily angered, with opportunities to help others.

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Angry Children, Punitive Measures

The negative behaviors of many youngsters invite angry responses from adults. Yet, despite these angry responses, many children are repeat offenders as they continue to engage in these behaviors. The reasons for this are complex. Some children come into the world with what has been referred to as a “difficult temperament,” meaning that they are hard to soothe or satisfy, feel that people are unfair and arbitrary, are rigid and unable to compromise, and quickly lose their temper. Other children have experienced emotional or physical abuse, leading to their mistrust of adults, expecting the worst even from those who are trying to help.

Ongoing challenging behaviors on the part of children test the understanding and patience of even the most empathic parents and other adults. When parents eventually display their frustration and annoyance, it confirms to these children that they are not loved and that adults are unkind. They experience the world as being angry with them. While some recognize to a certain extent that their behavior provokes this anger, others don’t seem to appreciate their role in the situation.

Whatever the reasons for development of this unfortunate scenario, it often becomes an entrenched family pattern in which anger is met with anger. Positive comments from parents become less and less frequent, while authoritarian forms of discipline become the rule rather than the exception (please see our December, 2006 article for a review of different disciplinary styles among parents). The goal of teaching children to be effective problem solvers and more caring, reflective, self-disciplined individuals recedes to the background as parents adopt a disciplinary style in which they angrily react to problems instead of preventing them. Parents report that using constructive, positive forms of discipline with these challenging youngsters takes on Herculean proportions. Yet, if parents fail to apply these constructive forms of discipline children will have a more difficult time developing self-control and resilience; instead, they will continue to perceive others as unfair and angry and their own anger will be intensified.

Disciplinary Practices and Contributory Activities

There are several key interventions for responding more effectively to angry youth that are based upon a preventive, positive model of discipline. In this article we highlight one such approach that we have emphasized in our earlier writings about resilience. It involves engaging children in what we call “contributory activities,” that is, activities in which they are involved in helping others. When participating in these activities, children are less likely to display negative or angry behaviors.

Some might say that contributory activities represent a feature of a time-honored disciplinary technique of distracting or re-directing children away from negative behaviors. Certainly there is some truth to this. However, we believe more than re-direction is involved. As we emphasized in our book *Raising Resilient Children*, children appear to come into the world with a desire to be helpful and valued. Three-year-olds will eagerly approach their parents while watching them mow the lawn and ask if they can help. They show interest in wanting to help us cook, rake leaves, build things with our tools, and even sweep the kitchen. It is as if they possess an inborn need to help and make a positive difference in the lives of others. While children can seem very self-centered at times, placing their own needs first, at the same time they achieve pleasure by being helpful.

Although parents may support the idea of involving children in contributory activities, some have wondered why we include this approach under the rubric of discipline. We do so

since we view discipline as a teaching process in which children learn self-discipline and responsibility. We also believe that employing techniques that are proactive rather than reactive serve to prevent or minimize the emergence of problems and lessen the anger felt by many children. When children feel that they have contributed to the welfare of others it reinforces the belief, “Because I am on this earth, it is a better place.” Such a belief adds meaning to one’s life regardless of one’s age. We have observed that helpful behaviors promote self-dignity, responsibility, and compassion. In addition, such behaviors invite increasingly positive feedback from adults that children experience as deserved and genuine. In such an atmosphere anger is defused.

Guideposts for Helping Children Feel They Make a Difference

There are several guideposts that parents can use as they seek to help their children feel they make a difference, thereby lessening their anger and reinforcing their self-discipline and resilience. These include:

Consider the Words You Use: When we suggest to parents that they ask their children to help out and be more responsible, a usual refrain we hear is, “We would love them to be more responsible. They just don’t seem interested (motivated) to do so.” However, we have learned that the specific words we use to describe responsibilities we wish our children to fulfill may influence the outcome of our requests. The label that many parents use to describe these responsibilities has unfortunately taken on negative connotations. That label is “chores.” The statement, “Remember to do your chores,” echoes repeatedly throughout many homes. When we ask parents at our workshops, “How many of you love to do chores?” rarely is a hand raised. However, when we ask, “How many of you like to help others?” almost all hands go up eagerly.

Can a label such as “chores” make a difference in a child’s perception of what is being requested and the extent to which he or she will be cooperative? We believe it can and it does. We appreciate that removing the word “chore” from the English language will not magically motivate children to be more responsible. However, we have found that when parents say to children, “We need your help,” children are more likely to respond in a cooperative manner since they are less likely to experience the parents’ request as an imposition. We are not suggesting that each time parents say to their children, “We need your help,” they will eagerly reply, “Thanks for asking me to help, Mom and Dad!” However, we believe that asking children for

assistance is more effective than telling (ordering) them to do things. Requests that are cast in terms of helping out tend to nurture compassion, responsibility, and resilience, and thus minimize negative behaviors that provoke parental frustration and anger.

Strive to Become a “Charitable Family”: We frequently ask parents the following questions:

“Have your children observed you engaged in activities in which you are helping others?”

“Have you and your children been engaged in such activities together as a family?”

These questions are predicated on the belief that it is easier to teach responsibility and caring when we serve as models for these behaviors and when we actively engage our children in contributory activities. A “charitable family” nurtures a tradition of involving the entire family in helping others and in our experience they tend to be families that are more likely to use an authoritative rather than an authoritarian disciplinary style. For instance, we know of parents who shifted from a punitive, reactive style of discipline to a style in which expectations for behavior were coupled with increased positive feedback, a problem-solving attitude (e.g., the parents asked their children what solutions the children could generate for particular challenges), and opportunities to become a charitable family (in one particular family both the mother’s mother and aunt had undergone mastectomies and consequently, the family participated in charity events for breast cancer research).

Since We Can’t Avoid “Chores,” Distribute Them Equitably: The reality is that even if we are careful to express to our children that we need their assistance for the household to run more smoothly, there are many responsibilities that fall within the boring or tedious category. How many of us are eager to clean our room, clear the dishes, or take out the garbage? These are the kinds of activities that result in procrastination or “forgetting,” which leads to nagging and more punitive forms of discipline. Parents frequently ask, “What can we do so that these chores are completed without our constant reminders or what our kids call ‘nagging’?” There are steps that parents can take to help get things done and prevent discipline problems.

1. Discuss why things have to be done. Talk with your children at quiet moments (i.e., not in the heat of an argument) why certain activities are important and what would occur if they weren’t done. One couple emphasized this point by informing their three children that if their

dirty clothes were not placed in the hamper, they would not be washed. When the older son in the family, a fourteen-year-old, discovered one morning that he was without a clean pair of pants or a shirt to wear, he quickly learned the consequences of not complying with his parents' request. Initially, he attempted to blame his parents, arguing that he didn't know they had done a wash the day before. They calmly informed him that he had a choice: he could remember to place his dirty clothes in the hamper or he could do his own wash. To their surprise, he chose to do his own laundry and from that point did his own wash and even his own ironing. Obviously, not many adolescents would select this particular choice, but it worked for him.

2. Have a family meeting about what needs to be done. Sit down as a family and make a list of the responsibilities that have to be met in the household. Often differences of opinion arise about what responsibilities are important. These differences can serve as the basis for further dialogue among family members. Some chores, which at one point may have been judged important, may later be discarded. Once a list of responsibilities has been created, a family can review which items can be accomplished only by certain members of the household and which ones can be done by anyone. This decision is typically determined in great part by the age and physical and cognitive skills of the children. For example, a family would not expect a four-year-old to clean leaves out of the gutters, but that child could help rake.

3. Figure out who does what, when, and for how long. When your list of responsibilities is completed and prioritized, a family can then develop a system of how these responsibilities should be delegated and for what length of time. Some responsibilities are more tedious than others. Many families design a rotating schedule so that chores among family members change every week or every month.

4. Agree on a way to remind each family member to fulfill his or her chores. Even with the aid of a written list of rotating chores, children (and even parents) may forget to meet their responsibilities. Discuss what the family should do if anyone, including parents, neglects to fulfill a responsibility so that reminders are not experienced as constant nagging. In our experience, many families build in simple reminders in the form of brief, non-accusatory verbal comments such as, "You forgot to clear the dishes" or "You left the family room without putting the games away." Other families place a chart of the specific responsibilities at key places around the house, and when a responsibility is not met, family members point to the chart. One

young teenager, who would often forget to take his medication in the morning and was angry at his parents for telling him to do so, came up with the novel idea of having his parents hold up a sign to remind him if he hadn't take his pills before 7:25 a.m. He even chose to create the sign himself, noting, "I will at least write the word 'please' on the sign." The idea was very successful, most likely, because it originated from him.

We remind parents that whatever the particular strategy they use, they should involve their children in understanding the importance of each family member contributing to the household and how the tasks can be distributed equitably. While parents can and should reserve the final say, children will appreciate their role in family life if they believe their views are being heard and validated. When this occurs they are more likely to be cooperative and responsible with an accompanying development of self-discipline.

Creating Paths for Success and Self-Discipline: A Case Example

In our clinical and consultation practices we have heard many examples of the benefits of involving children in contributory activities. One of the most vivid illustrations was conveyed by an assistant principal in an elementary school who had attended one of our workshops. She wrote, "Your work has helped to save a family. Jerry's (not his real name) mother sat in my office this fall crying. Jerry had given her difficulty for a few years but had recently become physically violent with her. We had started to see the same thing at school. On the day that Jerry ended up in a physical restraint here, his mother came in and confessed that she hated her own son, then began to sob. She told me that she was thinking about seeing if he could live in a group home because she couldn't take it anymore.

"I talked with Jerry and told him that I had a problem and thought he might be able to help me. We simply did not have enough custodial help during lunch time. He agreed to help me by wiping down tables and sweeping the floor for a half hour at the end of each lunch day. Our custodians (who are awesome and child-centered) thanked him profusely and gave him authentic compliments about the work he had done. Jerry has not been in trouble since he started his new job three months ago. He is no longer physically violent or disruptive during class."

In reading this insightful and courageous strategy used by this assistant principal, it reinforced our belief that in disciplining all children, but especially those who are angry and provocative, rather than resorting to punitive measures we must consider techniques for

preventing the anger from emerging or becoming overly intense. As we have noted, one possible technique involves providing opportunities for children to contribute to others. Instead of constantly punishing children, we should seek ways to help them to feel more dignified.

Some Wise Thoughts

As you reflect upon the main message of this article, it may be helpful to reflect upon the words by two renowned authors. Their insights capture their appreciation of the benefits of contributory activities.

Charles Dickens asserted, “No man is useless in this world who lightens the burden of anyone else.”

Walt Whitman observed, “When I give, I give myself.”

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