

Raising a Self-Disciplined Child:

An Excerpt, Part II

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Last month Dr. Sam Goldstein and I announced the release of our newest book, *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child: Help Your Child to Become More Responsible, Confident, and Resilient*, published by McGraw-Hill. We noted that a major goal in writing the book was to advance the position that discipline is most effective when it nurtures self-discipline, respect, and resilience rather than anger and resentment in children.

The publication of *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child* prompted us to share a two-part excerpt of the book, the first of which appeared last month. The excerpts are meant to portray different views of discipline and to illustrate the dialogue we have with parents as we encourage them to consider their disciplinary approach and whether it is rooted in the concepts of respect, love, and resilience. Our hope is that these excerpts will prompt you to reflect upon your own disciplinary views and practices.

The Ewings and Franklins

In last month's article we introduced two sets of parents we met at a parenting workshop, Bill and Samantha Ewing and Tom and Jennifer Franklin. They possessed contrasting disciplinary styles. Each of the couples had three children. The oldest in each family was a twelve-year-old son, Jim Ewing and Stevie Franklin. Compared with their younger siblings, they were described as temperamentally difficult, challenging to soothe, more irritable and argumentative, and less likely to be cooperative, especially when they felt frustrated.

The Ewings resorted to spanking, believing that was the only form of discipline to which Jim responded, although Samantha was less comfortable using corporal punishment than her husband. Bill Ewing contended, "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."

The Franklins followed a different path. Tom Franklin observed, "We know we have to maintain authority as parents. We know that some things are nonnegotiable. But we 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.”

We ended last month's article posing a number of questions about the function of discipline and ways in which to assist the Ewings to be less punitive. We emphasized that an end result of disciplining children should be the strengthening of what we call a “resilient mindset.” The following excerpt represents our attempts to have the Ewings adopt a more constructive disciplinary style, one that will contribute to Jim developing such a mindset.

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Developing Self-Discipline: Focus on Mindsets and Solutions

Children who possess a resilient mindset are hopeful and have high self-worth. They feel appreciated. They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations for themselves. They demonstrate self-discipline and have developed the ability to solve problems and make decisions. They are likely to view mistakes, hardships, and obstacles as challenges to confront rather than as stressors to avoid. They rely on productive coping strategies that foster growth rather than a feeling of defeat. Although these children are aware of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, they also recognize their strong points and talents. Their self-concept is filled with images of strength and competence. They have developed effective interpersonal skills with peers and adults alike. They are able to seek out help and nurturance comfortably and appropriately from adults who can provide the support they need. Finally, they can define the aspects of their lives they have control over, and they focus their energy and attention on these, rather than on factors over which they have little, if any, influence.

Viewing self-discipline as a driving force for individuals with resilient mindsets and lifestyles makes it easier to identify the skills and attitudes we are trying to reinforce in children when we discipline them. As parents, we want our disciplinary techniques to nurture a resilient mindset, including self-discipline. We want our children to develop attitudes about themselves and others that are in keeping with a more optimistic outlook and lifestyle. Let's examine how this perspective helped Bill and Samantha Ewing change their son's behavior.

The Ewing Family: “What Other Approach Can We Use?”

Given the seeming ineffectiveness of spanking Jim, we introduced the possibility with Bill and Samantha that they might want to change their style of discipline. When we did, Bill

Ewing countered, “Are you saying it’s our fault that Jim acts the way he does? If we back off and change, it will amount to giving in to him, and he’ll never get better. If anything, he’ll know that he can do whatever he wants without any consequence.”

We have frequently heard this argument. We responded by agreeing with Bill’s goal of wanting Jim to be more responsible and respectful, emphasizing that we were questioning only the means by which he attempted to achieve this goal. We have found that parents are more likely to considering new practices, especially those involving discipline, if we first genuinely validate the goals they express.

Thus, we told Bill that we agreed with his desire for Jim to meet his responsibilities and behave with respect. But we pointed out that Bill had complained that Jim had been showing a lack of respect for years and that spanking seemed to help only temporarily. We suggested that Bill and Samantha might need a new way to discipline him so that he would really change. In our experience, if parents use a certain form of discipline and it doesn’t work, the next logical step is to look at what they can do differently, rather than continuing to expect a sudden change in the child.

Fortunately, the Ewings recognized that we supported their wish for Jim to be more responsible and respectful. Bill asked, “What other approach can we use? I think we’ve exhausted every possible option. The calmer approach that Tom and Jennifer use with their son Stevie doesn’t seem to work with Jim.”

We suggested that the Ewings consider using discipline designed to develop a resilient mindset.

Samantha wondered, “What’s that?”

We reviewed the attributes of a resilient mindset, focusing primarily on increasing Jim’s sense of ownership and responsibility for his own behavior by involving him in problem-solving activities. We suggested to the parents that they use an approach similar to that advanced by our colleague Myrna Shure. Dr. Shure has developed a successful program titled “I Can Problem Solve” in which children are engaged in arriving at solutions to difficult situations. More specifically, we recommended that the Ewings sit down with Jim during a quiet time and say to him, “We think we may be nagging you too much. What do you think?”

Bill immediately said, “I know Jim will say yes that we do nag him too much. But what he calls nagging we see as our job as his parents to make certain he meets his responsibilities.”

We agreed with Jim’s prediction and guessed that their son would also fail to see his role in all of this. We coached Bill that once Jim agreed his parents nag him too much, they could say they don’t want to do it and want to figure out with him what will help.

Samantha said, “He’ll probably say that what will help is for us to stop reminding him to do some things and stop spanking him when he’s disrespectful.”

We again agreed, advising the Ewings that if Jim said that, they could take ownership for their behavior by promising they would try not to yell or spank—and add that they wanted Jim to think about what he could do differently to improve the situation.

Bill answered with a sentiment we have heard from other parents when we’ve suggested this line of conversation: “Jim will probably say he doesn’t know what will improve his situation. Or he might say that if we didn’t nag him, he’d follow through and wouldn’t speak disrespectfully to us. But we know that even if he says this, he really won’t follow through.”

We observed that even if he hasn’t followed through in the past, our experience is that if children come up with ideas for remembering to do things or for being reminded if they forget, they are more likely to be cooperative, since the ideas came from them. This method increases their feeling of ownership, improves their problem-solving skills, and will help them become more resilient and cooperative.

Also, we advised that if Jim said he didn’t know what he could do differently, Bill and Samantha should avoid putting him on the spot. Instead, they could simply say, “We wouldn’t expect you to know at this moment, but think about it for a day or two.”

We added that our goal is for children to become more respectful and cooperative, not for them to be compliant, obedient, resentful, or angry. We want them to develop self-discipline, which basically implies that they take ownership for their own behavior.

We cautioned the Ewings that changing the way they spoke with Jim or reacted to him would not lead to an overnight change. The problem had been going on for years and would take time and patience to correct. We said this because some parents who have gone out of their way to modify their own behavior become angry and resort to harsh punishments when they feel their children are not changing as quickly as they would like. However, we predicted that if Bill and

Samantha would become less punitive and harsh, they would eventually see an improvement in Jim's behavior.

To define more clearly and support the changes the Ewings planned to make with Jim, we engaged in some role-playing activities. We asked the Ewings to consider various scenarios with Jim, what they thought his response would be to their changes in behavior, and how they would respond in kind. Although they had difficulty modifying their established scripts (patterns of responding), they recognized that the approach they had been using was leading to an angry and strained relationship with Jim. We encouraged the Ewings to link their disciplinary practices with these two questions: Is what we're doing reinforcing self-discipline and a resilient mindset in Jim? Is it leading to a more positive relationship with him?

The Ewings consulted with us for several months. Jim could prove challenging, so they occasionally questioned whether this more "reasonable" approach would be effective, but they stuck with it. One reason they persevered was that they recognized the extent to which their previous script had been negative and self-defeating. They found that a strength-based perspective of discipline, supported by the concept of a resilient mindset, offered an effective alternative to their earlier style of disciplining Jim.

The Ewings also discovered another important benefit of linking discipline to resilience: it greatly improved their relationship with their son. As we have emphasized in our previous books, discipline is most effective when carried out within a caring relationship. Such a relationship is the foundation upon which a resilient mindset, characterized by qualities such as self-discipline, compassion, respect, and responsibility, flourishes.

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We hope that this two part excerpt together with the three website articles we wrote last year about discipline have illustrated the disciplinary approach we advocate for parents and other caregivers, an approach in which parents are loving, firm, and respectful, assisting their children to develop a sense of ownership and accountability for their own behavior. Under these conditions self-discipline will thrive, preparing children for the challenges that await them throughout their lives.