

Perspectives on Discipline: The Power of Prevention

Part II

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

In my last newsletter I discussed spanking as a disciplinary technique. I presented research findings as well as my own observations about corporal punishment, arguing that it is a counterproductive form of discipline that may actually reinforce the very behaviors parents wish to stop in their children. I know that many well-meaning parents may occasionally spank their children, but I believe there are more effective ways of helping children learn right from wrong and developing a social conscience.

I noted the work of Dr. Murray Straus, founder and co-director of the Family Research Lab at the University of New Hampshire in Durham and author of, "Beating the Devil Out of Them." Dr. Straus observed, "In the last three years, we've had a revolution in our state of knowledge about spanking and violence. Spanking increases the probability of kids hitting other kids. It often leads to antisocial behavior like cheating and getting into trouble at school. When they are teenagers, these children are more likely to hit their parents. When they grow up, kids who have been spanked are more likely to hit their partners than kids who haven't."

I ended last month's article by saying that I would devote this month's article to examining what I believe to be more effective forms of discipline. Based on the comments and questions I received in response to last month's newsletter, I plan to focus this newsletter on the theme of prevention of disciplinary problems and next month's newsletter on forms of discipline that are not associated with corporal punishment.

I am frequently asked, "If spanking is ineffective and counterproductive, what do you consider to be one of the most productive approaches to discipline?" Similar to the real estate agent who when asked what is important when considering what house to purchase, responds, "Three things, location, location, location," without hesitation I answer, "Prevention, prevention, and more prevention." We must become increasingly proactive and less reactive when considering disciplinary problems. I believe that many instances of misbehavior on the part of children can be avoided if we anticipate and/or understand what may be contributing to these behaviors.

I would like to review four guidelines that are part of a prevention approach. I am not suggesting that if we follow these guidelines we will erase all misbehavior, but rather that adherence to these guidelines will lessen the occurrence of such behavior, minimize stress and tension in one's household, and foster the development of self-discipline in our

children. While what follows may seem to be obvious and commonsense parenting and teaching practices, they require continued reflection and practice.

1. Have realistic expectations for your children and anticipate situations that are likely to elicit misbehavior. In our new book “Raising Resilient Children,” Dr. Sam Goldstein and I offer many examples of the negative consequences that occur when parents have unrealistic expectations for their children. When we place the bar too high for our children, they are likely to feel pressure that often results in undesirable behaviors. To have realistic expectations requires that we recognize the unique strengths and vulnerabilities of our children and that we appreciate their developmental capabilities. Let’s look at a couple of examples of misbehavior that are rooted in unrealistic expectations.

Years ago my wife and I went to a lovely restaurant on a Saturday evening. It was the kind of restaurant in which one spends several hours enjoying a meal in a relaxed atmosphere. In other words, it was far removed from the frenetic pace of a fast food restaurant. Shortly after we were seated, a couple came in with their son who appeared to be about four-years-old. I thought he was a little young for such an environment but I told myself not to be judgmental, reminding myself that every child is different (a basic message in all of my parenting workshops) and some children can manage places geared for adults.

I knew that my sons at that age as well as most other four-year-olds would probably have had difficulty in this restaurant. I am not suggesting that my sons were not well-behaved (I have to be careful what I write since they will probably read this newsletter), but rather that sitting for several hours in one place as they wait for what seems like an inordinate amount of time for their meal was not in keeping with their temperament or developmental level when they were four years of age (to be honest, sometimes I have difficulty sitting for this length of time as an adult).

After a short while the child started to become irritable, repeatedly asking when the food was coming. He began to push the silverware and almost knocked over a glass of water. At this point his mother held his arm firmly (actually, from my angle it appeared that a little pinch was involved) and said to him that he had to learn to sit still and wait for his food. The situation deteriorated and the parents warned him of punishments that awaited him as he began to cry.

Perhaps this was atypical behavior on his part but without my making too many assumptions, it appeared that expectations were being placed on this child that were unrealistic, prompting misbehavior on his part, and threats and punishment on the part of his parents. While I believe we should help our children learn to delay gratification and

develop self-control, this situation appeared beyond that which the child was capable so that little, if any, learning was possible.

Another example of the bar being set too high involved a young teenage girl. Both of her parents were “A” students when they were adolescents and they expected the same from their daughter. The parents consulted with me in response to their daughter’s “increased rebelliousness.” As I gathered a history of their daughter’s development and reviewed her school records, I wondered about the presence of learning difficulties, a hypothesis that was borne out in a subsequent evaluation that I recommended.

The parents viewed their daughter as capable of achieving A’s but in fact given her learning struggles it was difficult for her to do so. Punishing her for not reaching the grades that they felt she was capable of obtaining triggered feelings of resentment in them and their daughter. Once her learning disability was diagnosed and more realistic expectations and appropriate support built in, her “rebelliousness” decreased markedly.

The main point of these two examples is not that we do away with goals for our children but rather that we continually examine whether what we expect of them is in keeping with what they can deliver and with their developmental level. When it is not, we must modify our expectations and in the process disciplinary problems will be minimized or prevented.

2. Understand why your child is acting the way he or she is. In my career as a psychologist I have encountered many well-meaning parents who punish their children because of misguided assumptions about their child’s behavior. While I am not advocating that parents become armchair psychologists analyzing every word and action of their children, I do believe we must step back from time to time and ask why our children may be misbehaving.

Parents consulted with me about their four-year-old boy’s defiant behavior at bedtime. When it was time for bed, he would refuse to go to his room and run through the house, often resulting in his parents grabbing him. In response, he would scream and yell, sometimes prompting them to spank him. While the parents viewed his behavior as being “oppositional and manipulative,” in an interview I had with him he revealed very “scary” dreams that contributed to his fear of going to sleep. I felt that his struggles at bedtime were elicited in great part by intense anxiety and were not a result of his being an oppositional, manipulative child.

When I asked him what he thought would help, this precocious child offered two suggestions to ease his anxiety. He requested a night-light, which his parents had previously refused, believing he was old enough not to need one, and amazingly, a photo of his parents next to his bed that he could look at to ease his worries.

His parents were willing to follow these suggestions, and much to their surprise his tantrums subsided as did his intense fears of which they had not been aware. I wish I could report that all interventions work out as smoothly and successfully as this one. While some do not, I have been impressed that with a little more understanding of and response to a child's feelings, disciplinary problems can be minimized.

In another situation, a 10-year-old girl demonstrated what her parents said was increased "sassiness" towards them. She often refused to help out with household responsibilities and would find ways of putting them down. Her mother said, "Up until a year ago, she was cooperative. Maybe it's the adolescent hormones kicking in. She's not very pleasant to be with."

I asked if anything had happened in their daughter's life or the family's life during the past year. Interestingly, her father said he had been diagnosed with what he called "a mild case of skin cancer." He added that following treatment he was fine now and it was no big deal. I asked about his daughter's reaction to his cancer. This obviously loving father said, "We just told her that I would be okay and I was and that there was no need to worry about it. She seemed to accept this."

When I spoke with their daughter, she had a very different view about her father's "mild case of skin cancer." Her continued anxiety about her father was on the surface. She talked about another child in the class whose father had died of cancer and she added, "I'm not sure things are okay since my parents seem to be hiding something. If I ask a question, they just say things are okay and then they don't seem to want to talk about it. They treat me like a baby." In listening to her I felt that her sassiness masked a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty. I decided to schedule a family meeting with the parents, this girl, and her eight-year-old brother.

The meeting went very well as both parents openly discussed their initial anxieties when father was diagnosed with cancer, but they added that in fact he was fine now. They told their children that they had thought that talking about it too much would actually result in their children being more worried than they had to be. They said that they now realized that their hesitancy to talk more directly about father's cancer proved counterproductive since it added to their children's worries.

This openness in discussing the cancer was very helpful. It allowed the daughter to ask her father directly, "But do you think there's a chance you will die from the cancer?" Her father was able to answer that from everything the doctor had told him, he was fine. I suggested that father ask his physician if he would be willing to meet with the entire family to discuss father's excellent prognosis. The physician agreed. The parents

reported that after the meeting their daughter “appeared noticeably more happy and relaxed and her sassiness and lack of cooperation disappeared.”

There should be consequences when our children misbehave but as these last two cases indicate, sometimes misbehavior is handled best by focusing on what is eliciting the behavior rather than imposing stricter and harsher consequences.

3. Select your battlegrounds carefully. I’m certain that all of you have heard this statement many times, but it is easier said than done. I can write a book, including examples from my own parenting practices with my children, about things our children do or don’t do that prompt our punishing them—things that in the course of teaching children values and responsibility are not really important.

It is for this reason that I advocate that parents take a “helicopter view” of their children’s lives. From this perspective we can observe where our children have been, where they are now, and where we hope they go. As we perceive our children’s lives in this way we may recognize that what appears to be a major issue at the moment may be a small, inconsequential part of our child’s life terrain. In other words, it is not worth arguing about and is best ignored. Obviously, I am not talking about issues of safety and security but about less significant ones.

I worked with one family with three teenage daughters where battles ensued every morning. Most focused on what the parents called their daughters’ lack of responsibility and lack of respect, prompting the parents to punish them after school. The main forms of punishment involved grounding them or not permitting them to watch television. While these forms of punishment might not seem overly harsh, to these girls they were, actually leading to greater tension and anger in the household.

I decided to meet with the parents alone and requested that they make a list of all of their daughters’ responsibilities during the day but especially the morning. The list was quite lengthy and while each item taken by itself might seem reasonable, I wondered what would happen if certain items were removed. For instance, the girls questioned the need to make their beds with the heavy cover (covers for which they saw no necessity) or to have books and papers stacked neatly on their desk in preparation for doing their homework when they arrived home (all three were good students).

At first, the parents wondered that if they backed off, would their daughters be less likely to develop a more responsible attitude. I asked that they take a “helicopter perspective” and notice in all of the ways their daughters were responsible. The parents were pleasantly surprised to see that in fact their daughters were indeed very responsible. The parents stopped “nagging” (according to the daughters) about the beds being made perfectly or the desk looking like it belonged to someone who “suffered from anal

retentiveness.” The mother even said to me that she stopped nagging about the toothpaste cover being placed back on the tube. I reinforced this by saying with humor that I had not come across one study to show any correlation between putting the cover back on the toothpaste tube and success later in life.

As parents we must take into consideration our children’s unique temperaments and skills, and decide what areas are important to be firm about and what behaviors are best left alone. For some strong-willed children, insisting that they finish all of their cereal or that they not wear two different colored socks to school may not be worth the battle since it leads to increased struggles, anger, and harsher disciplinary techniques.

4. Practice positive feedback and encouragement. We often forget that one of the most powerful forms of discipline is positive feedback and encouragement. In previous newsletters I have discussed the concept of a “praise deficit” and helping others to feel special and appreciated. I believe that misbehavior will be lessened when we “catch our children doing something good,” when we set aside “special times” to be with each child alone, when we share in their interests, when we respond to their mistakes with words of encouragement rather than criticism, and when we write them notes of endearment (although adolescents may not admit it, most have told me that they enjoy receiving such notes even if they call them “silly” or “corny”).

I often emphasize at my workshops that discipline is most effective within a loving relationship, a relationship in which children know we care about them and that we recognize their strengths and their inner goodness. Each time we communicate an awareness of their strengths we help to prevent misbehavior from occurring, and we are practicing preventive discipline. Such an approach is far more effective and less exhausting than one that focuses on the best ways of responding to or punishing children when they act in ways that are inappropriate.

One final comment. In my work with parents, teachers, and other caregivers, I have placed increasing emphasis on prevention as an effective disciplinary philosophy; however, I recognize that even when we practice the guidelines outlined in this article, many situations will still arise in which our children misbehave and in which they must learn that there are consequences for their behavior. How else are they to become more responsible, caring, compassionate individuals? As noted above, in next month’s newsletter I will examine interventions for responding to undesirable behaviors, interventions that respect the definition of discipline as a teaching process and that lead to the development of self-discipline rather than ongoing anger and resentment.