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Spanking: Alternative Discipline Strategies

A Handout for Parents

by Maureen Lynch
State University of New York-Albany

Background

Parenting is one of the most humbling things we do. All the "I will never . . ." we promised while watching others struggle raising their children suddenly crumble. Yet most professionals and parents agree that one "I will never . . ." we're wise to keep is the resolve to never spank. When a child is spanked, no one wins. Anger is provoked by the hitting in both the parent and the child. The child feels badly and may misbehave even more. Often a distance develops between parent and child.

Studies have shown that spanking can cause negative long-term effects. Children raised in homes with a lot of physical punishment turn out to be more anti-social and egocentric, and physical violence becomes the accepted norm. It is important that we remember we are raising someone's future spouse and future parent. The evidence is really overwhelming. The hundreds of studies done all come to the same conclusions: spanking doesn't work; spanking often results in later violent behavior; the more children are spanked, the more likely they will be abusive toward their own children.

When you make the promise to yourself that you will never spank, that promise can hold you steady at times of embarrassment, frustration and exhaustion all times when it is easy to turn to spanking. Those who rely on spanking are at a disadvantage because they never develop other more appropriate techniques to use with their children.

What Works?

The focus of this handout is on children ages two to ten. During the first two years, your best strategies will be mainly distracting and redirecting. After age ten, children begin to enter puberty and both the problems and the approaches may change.

Prevention is always best, of course. Taking the time the time to learn about your child's level of development can sometimes help you prevent misbehavior. If you learn what is realistic to expect for your child's age, you may be able to prevent behavior problems. Some time spent observing your child will also tell you a lot about his or her temperament and quirks. There may be times of the day or specific activities that just cause too many problems. After a busy morning of errands that meant getting in and out of the car a half a dozen times, that last stop at the grocery store may not be worth the melt down it will probably cause. A better move would be to go home for lunch and a nap, and to pick up the groceries later.

Yet even with the most sensitive parenting, there seem to be certain inevitable battlegrounds the car, bedtime, etc. Here are some suggestions for helping your child behave better without having to resort to hitting or spanking. These are taken from *The Discipline Book* by William and Martha Sears. Readers are encouraged to look at the book for a more detailed description.

Clear Talking

A major part of discipline is learning how to talk to your child. The situation and the child will help you decide what approach to take. You'll never want to use all of these at once. But here are some things to try:

1. **Connect first** Get to eye level and maintain eye contact before giving directions.
2. **Use the name** Begin with your child's name: "Amy, please . . . "
3. **Make it brief** You may want to keep it to one sentence. The longer you ramble the more likely your child will think you're wavering.
4. **Stay simple** When your child gets the glazed look you can be certain you are no longer being understood.
5. **Repeat** Ask your child to repeat the directions back to you. If s/he isn't able to, you will know they were too complicated or too long.
6. **Make it irresistible** To avoid power struggles you can remind a toddler about the advantages of doing what you want: "Ethan, when you're finished getting dressed we can go outside to play."
7. **Be positive** Instead of "No screaming!" try "Use your inside voice." Or make up a whispering game.
8. **Begin your direction with "I want"** This seems to work well with children who don't like being ordered but want to please. "I want" or "I need" allows the child to respond to a request rather than an order.
9. **When . . . then** This sounds like you expect obedience and reminds the child of the advantages of completing the task. For instance, "When you finish brushing your teeth, we'll read some stories."
10. **Give choices** Questions like "Yellow shirt or purple one?" "Which toys do you want in the tub?" can help a child become interested in the task at hand.
11. **Speak correctly-developmentally** Asking a very young child why they did something isn't very helpful. You could instead say, "We need to talk about something you did." Likewise the younger the child, the simpler and the shorter the commands and the comments should be.
12. **Speak correctly-socially** Speak to your child the way you want them to speak to you. Help them learn that good manners are expected, not just an option.
13. **Psychologically** Threats or heavy reprimands put children on the defensive. Likewise it is helpful to avoid a leading question when a negative answer is not an option. "Would you like to" can be replaced with "Please"

14. **Write it down** Reminders can easily sound like nagging to an older child. You can communicate reminders with a pad and pencil, even put on a funny sticker.
15. **Help the child calm down** The louder the child yells, the softer you should respond. If you come in at the loud level you will have two tantrums to deal with. So be calm and be the adult for your child. Sometimes just having a listener will help the tantrum wind down. Nothing will sink in if the child is falling apart emotionally.
16. **Replay the message** Very young children will need to have the directions repeated but preteens regard repetition as nagging.
17. **Let your child complete the thought** Instead of telling your child not to leave their room a mess, try "Where do you want to keep your soccer stuff?"
18. **Rhyme rules** "If you hit, you must sit" is a good way to teach rules. Ask your child to repeat it after you.
19. **Give appealing alternatives** Even though going alone to the park is not allowed, playing in the neighbor's backyard could be OK.
20. **Encourage the use of words** "Use words to tell me" can be a reminder to not scream or whine.
21. **Advance notice** An announcement like, "Five more minutes and we're leaving" can make departures seem less abrupt.
22. **Close the discussion** When a matter is closed for discussion let your child know. It will save wear and tear on both of you. Use your "I mean business" voice to say, "I'm serious about this. I'm not changing my mind."

Discipline Strategies

1. **Praise** Sometimes it seems like you have to work hard to catch your child being good. But it's worth the effort since praise is a very effective way to influence your child. It's a good idea to get in the habit of praising the behavior and not the child "I like the way you put your clothes away. Your room looks great!" Praise tends to lose its power if expected behavior gets showered with praise. So it's important to keep it genuine and fresh a thumbs up when passing a doorway, a post- it on a pillow or in a lunch box.
2. **Selective ignoring** Many parents have an unspoken agreement to ignore small things, behavior that is annoying but does no harm to people or to property. In order for this to really work, you have to be making the time to acknowledge desirable behaviors. Remember you're ignoring the misbehavior, not the child. Not getting dragged into squabbles about toys helps the child respect the parent's job description "I don't settle petty arguments." Practicing your selective ignoring skills also helps prepare you for the challenges yet to come teenagers' dress and moody behavior.
3. **Time out** Some people call this quiet time or thinking time. Time out works best if it is used to shape behavior rather than punish it. It stops misbehavior and gives both the child and the parent time to reflect. Once again in order for it to work you need to give a lot of "time in". Make sure you have prepared your child so they connect the behavior with the time out. Some families have a time out place such as a stool in the kitchen. It's important that you stay cool and avoid yelling as you escort

the child to the time out area. The time should be brief, about one minute per year of age. Keep time out quiet. You may want to use a stove timer or alarm clock. It might be helpful to ask the school psychologist about a specific time out approach to use with your child. Just remember, after time out is over, it's over. The time has been served and it's best to get on with the day.

4. Teach understanding of consequences Children learn self-discipline by experiencing the consequences of their choices. We all learn best from our own mistakes. The trick, of course, is to prevent dangerous and expensive mistakes. Whenever possible, assuming this won't be dangerous or expensive, state your opinion then back off and let the consequence teach your child. Slowly the child learns to take responsibility for their behavior.

5. Motivating Reward charts, certificates, and other prizes are all ways to set limits and get jobs done. Work with your child. Let your child help make the chart and make daily entries.

6. Reminders A reminder can be a look when a child is about to misbehave, or a short verbal cue that jogs a child's memory about something that needs care. Written reminders are appreciated by youngsters who don't like to feel controlled.

7. Negotiating If used wisely, negotiating improves communication between parent and child, and helps children develop confidence in their viewpoint while learning how to stand up for their rights. You need to make it clear what things aren't negotiable. Also important are a tone of respect when negotiating. If the session becomes a yelling or whining one, you will need to remind your child that a house rule is that you are the parent and not to be talked to in that tone. Now the negotiations are over for today.

8. Withdrawal of privileges This technique works best when it is naturally connected with the behavior. If you ride your tricycle into the street you lose it for the rest of the day. If you miss the morning carpool you must walk to school, etc. The child needs to know the rule ahead of time so it doesn't seem like an arbitrary move on the part of an angry parent.

The Alternative: Good Discipline

Coming up with discipline strategies is a very personal decision based on your parenting style, your child's age and temperament, and the problems themselves. Parenting, being what it is, you'll develop a great system only to find that your child is on to new situations that require different responses from you. But no matter what your child's age, one of the best gifts you can give them is the chance to grow up with both respect and limits, exactly what a good discipline program will offer.

Resources

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