

# DISCIPLINE



**JAMES C. DOBSON, PH.D.**

## Discipline

By James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

For three decades Dr. James Dobson has been America's leading authority and advocate for the family. Taken from the bestseller *Dr. Dobson's Handbook of Family Advice*, this Special Report is full of helpful information for families at all stages. Let's read along now as Dr. Dobson discusses discipline.

### Challenge the Chief

Have you noticed that children will occasionally disobey their parents for the express purpose of testing just how much they can get away with? This game, called challenge-the-chief, can be played with surprising skill, even by very young children.

One father told me recently of taking his three-year-old daughter to a basketball game. Naturally, this kid was interested in everything in the gymnasium except the game, so the father permitted her to roam free. But first he walked her down to the stripe painted on the gym floor, and he told her not to go past that line. No sooner had he returned to his seat than she went scurrying down to that forbidden territory and stopped at the border. Then she flashed a grin at her father and deliberately put one foot over the line. It was as if she were saying: "Whatcha gonna do about it?"

Virtually every parent the world over has been asked that same question at one time or another. How it is answered is vitally important to the parent-child relationship. When a mom or dad ignores this kind of challenge, something changes in the mind of the child. For a particularly strong-willed boy or girl, that early test of parental leadership can grow into a full-blown case of rebellion during the troubled days of adolescence.

The ultimate paradox of childhood is that boys and girls want to be led by their parents, but they insist that their mothers and fathers earn the right to lead them. We should not miss the opportunity to do so.

### Parental Authority

One writer on the subject of child development suggested that parents and children should be on an even playing field—making decisions by negotiation and compromise. After all, he said, who knows what is best for the boy or girl? Maybe the child is right and the parent is wrong.

When I heard that advice, with which I strongly disagree, I was reminded of a little

hamster that once belonged to my daughter. One day I sat watching that furry little animal trying to get out of his cage. He worked tirelessly to open the gate and push his furry little nose between the bars. Then I noticed our dachshund, Siggie, sitting eight feet away in the shadows. He was watching the hamster, too. His ears were erect, and it was obvious what was on his mind. He was thinking, Come on, baby. Open that door, and I'll have you for lunch. If the hamster had been so unfortunate as to escape from his cage, which he desperately wanted to do, he would have been dead in a matter of seconds.

Obviously, I saw something from where I sat that the hamster couldn't have known. I had a different perspective than he did. I was aware of dangers that he couldn't have foreseen. That's why I denied him something that he desperately wanted to achieve.

So it is with children. Parents have the perspective of maturity that their kids lack. Sometimes the very thing they want most would be disastrous if they should be granted it. That's why I am a firm advocate of parental authority when children are young. Even though parents aren't perfect, most of them do what is best for their kids—and we must not undermine their ability to lead in their own homes.

This position is supported unequivocally by Scripture: The apostle Paul wrote, "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord" (Colossians 3:20).

## **Shakespeare and Me**

How do you teach basic honesty to kids? Well, I can tell you how my mother did it. When I was in the eighth grade, I was required to read a certain number of great books during the first semester. Like most fourteen-year-olds, however, I had other things on my mind.

I still hadn't begun the assignment as we approached the end of the term—so I selected the thickest, heaviest books in the library and told my teacher I had read them all. Consequently, she gave me an A+ on my report card. My mom was impressed, my dad was proud, and I was as guilty as sin.

In a moment of true confession, I admitted to my mother that I had cheated. Instead of getting mad at me or grounding me for six years, she simply said, quietly but with intensity, "Well, you'll just have to read the books."

"But, Mom," I said, "how can I read the collected works of William Shakespeare, Ben Hur, and about ten other huge books?"

“I don’t know,” she said, “but you’re gonna do it.” I spent the rest of that school year poring over the classics, while my friends played football and talked to girls outside my window. I’ll tell you, it was grueling. No one ever paid more dearly for a little dishonesty. When the task was finally done, I went to my teacher and tearfully confessed the entire scam. She forgave me, and my mom let me rejoin the human race.

I never forgot that lesson in accountability, as painful as it was. But I’m glad the lady of the house didn’t let me off the hook. She was too smart for that!

### **Mom Goes to School**

I want to tell you about my mother, who was a master at trench warfare during my stubborn adolescent years. I could never hide anything from her for long, and she knew, intuitively, that I was getting into trouble at school.

One day she sat me down and said firmly, “I know you have been fooling around and giving your teachers a hard time. Well, I’ve thought it over, and I’ve decided that I’m not going to do anything about it. I’m not going to punish you. I’m not going to take away privileges. I’m not even going to talk about your foolishness anymore.”

I was smiling until she added, “But I do want you to understand one thing. If the principal or the teachers ever call me, I promise you that the next day I’m going to school with you. I’ll walk two feet behind you all day. I’ll hold your hand in front of all your friends. When you sit in class, I’ll climb into the seat with you. For one full day, you won’t be able to shake me off.”

That threat absolutely terrified me. It would have been social suicide to have my mother following me in front of my friends. No punishment would have been worse! Beat me, but don’t go to school with me! I’m sure my teachers wondered why there was such a remarkable improvement in my behavior near the end of my freshman year in high school.

You might try my mom’s approach with your teenagers. But please—don’t tell them where you got the idea.

### **Linking Behavior to Consequences**

Sheltering a child from the consequences of his or her behavior could help create an immature adult later.

One of the prime objectives during the preadolescent years is to teach a child that

behavior leads inevitably to consequences. Unfortunately, that connection is often interrupted. For example, a seven-year-old begs for a dog but is never asked to feed and care for him. A ten-year-old is caught stealing candy from a store, but he's released to the custody of his parents. Nothing happens. A fifteen-year-old takes the keys to the family car, but the parents pay the fine for her driving without a license. So all through childhood, such loving parents, in their misguided efforts to shield the child from pain, have stood between his or her behavior and the natural consequences that flow from it. Under these circumstances, a young person may enter adulthood not really knowing that life can bite. He or she may become a grown-up adolescent constantly needing someone to bail him or her out of trouble.

How does one avoid this blunder? By linking behavior to consequences. If Jane carelessly loses her lunch money, she just may have to skip a meal. If Jack misses the school bus because he dawdled in the morning, he may have to walk to school.

Now obviously, it would be easy to carry this principle too far and become harsh. But a taste of bitter fruit that irresponsibility brings can teach a youngster valuable lessons that may be useful later on.

### **Using Reinforcement and Extinction**

It's a well-known fact that behavior that is not rewarded will eventually disappear. This process is called "extinction," and it can be a very useful tool for parents and teachers.

Have you ever wondered, for example, why so many young children develop a tendency to whine when they speak to their parents? Simply stated: Children whine because whining works. Mom and Dad are too busy and too preoccupied to respond to a normal voice. But they react immediately when their kids irritate them with a grating, unpleasant sound. What the parents are doing is rewarding (or "reinforcing") the whining response and extinguishing the more desirable behavior.

How can this process be reversed? Well, you might try saying, "Johnny, did you know I have very funny ears? They can't hear a whining voice. I can only hear a pleasant voice." Then proceed to ignore anything said in an irritating tone, but respond immediately when the normal voice is used. In this way, reward and extinction instantly become powerful tools for parents who understand properly how they work.

Remember this guiding principle: Behavior that produces desirable results will recur, and behavior that fails in the eyes of the child will tend to go away. It's as simple as that.



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