

Five Keys to Positive Discipline

By Cliff Crain, MFT

I have never met a parent who did not want what was best for his child. Yet, I have met many parents who felt that being a good parent is something that should happen naturally, without effort. This has not been my personal experience. As a father of two, I have learned that regardless of how much I love my children, successful parenting requires a lot of work. It also required me to have the willingness to go beyond my comfort zone on many occasions.

Below are five keys to positive discipline for children.



First Key: Know that your relationship with your child is more important than any project you may be undertaking. Your loving relationship, built upon trust and respect, will help you and your child weather many storms (and tantrums).

There are numerous good systems for disciplining children available in the marketplace today. Parents can undermine any of them by treating a child disrespectfully. What do I mean by this?

Here are a few ways well-intentioned PARENTS UNDERMINE THE RELATIONSHIP they have with their child:

1. **Expect perfection.** Expect that your child should never make a mistake and that it is your job to punish them if they do!
2. **Argue** and hotly debate your discipline rules. Use lots of logic to convince your child to see how foolishly they are behaving!
3. **Raise your voice** and yell at your child when they are being disrespectful. (Your child is watching this adult temper-tantrum. Raising your voice models for your child a culture of “THE LOUDEST PERSON SHOULD WIN THE ARGUMENT”.)
4. **Stay busy** with your life. Do not make understanding and appreciating your child’s world a priority.



Second Key: Take time regularly to reflect upon appropriate rules and boundaries for your family. Clarify these with your child and help them see that it is the parent’s job to set the boundaries. These can always be discussed when time allows, but they are not to be argued about each time there is a disagreement. As your child gets older and shows his/her ability to live responsibly, the family rules can be negotiated and agreed upon changes that are age-appropriate can be made.

It can be helpful to have a FAMILY BINDER where you write down the main rules you want the family to follow and the consequences for breaking a rule. Offer lots of praise to children who obey family rules, and make sure you model the behaviors you are wanting to see in the child. (For example, if you want your child to keep his room organized and his clothing picked up, it is important that you do these things also.)



Third Key: Build the problem-solving skills of your child.

Offering the child lots of choices that you can live with will help your child master problem solving skills. For example, you might ask your child if he wants the red sweater or the blue jacket: or you might ask if he wants to wear his jacket or carry it.

When a child comes to you with a problem, don't be too quick to fix the problem. First, ask him what he thinks might be a solution that is a "win-win" for all concerned. Take time to help him look at new possibilities. Avoid trying to take his learning experience away from him by giving him your ideas and/or immediately solving the problem.

When a child makes a choice that does not work, avoid piggybacking onto the situation with your wisdom. Let your child learn about life by experiencing the consequences of his/her decisions. Naturally, we don't want your child to have to pay too high a price for a poor choice; but, in general, it is better for him to learn from his mistakes while he is young and the price is small. (For more on this topic, see Jim Fay's best selling book, Parenting with Love and Logic.)



Fourth Key: Help your child learn to delay gratification. The ability to patiently wait is not encouraged in our society. Modeling patience for your child, when things are not going as you would wish them to go, is very big gift to your child and to your entire family. The child can learn to be OK with detours, and with not always getting what he/she wants immediately.

One simple way to help your child learn this is to not drop everything when your child asks for something. Helping your child manage the frustration and unpleasant feelings that emerge while waiting will help your child manage impatience. Our task, as loving and effective parents, is to help our child develop skills that lead to him or her to finding success and happiness as an adult. The ability to "wait" calmly has been shown to be a very useful and positive trait for people of all ages.



Fifth Key: Help your child develop empathy. It is natural for young children to view the world in a very narcissistic way. We need to respect the normal developmental stages our child must navigate, and allow them some self-centeredness. We never want to shame them, or blame them, for just being a normal self-centered kid. Nevertheless, we can encourage them in gentle and loving ways, to develop more awareness and appreciation for other people.

Lecturing about having more empathy (or just about any other topic) will not generally have much of a positive impact. However, you can ask your child what they think another person might be feeling. For example, if your toddler (or teenager) refuses to share with a friend, you might lovingly ask your child if they can guess what their friend might be feeling.

Another skill you can help your child develop is reading non-verbal signs. When you are watching a movie together, you might pause it to ask your child what the facial expression, or body language, of a particular character can tell us about his/her feelings and thoughts. Alternatively, you can people watch at a park and ask your child if they can learn anything about other people by watching them. Children who do not learn to read non-verbal cues are handicapped in their understanding of how the world works.

Finally, be ever watchful to find times to celebrate your child's acts of kindness. This can be done directly, by telling them how proud you are of something they did to help another. Even better, you can honor your child indirectly. **It can be very powerful and supportive to share the pride you feel for your child's positive behavior to another adult while your child is listening.**

Using these five keys to positive discipline will be a gift to your child, and will help your child unlock a successful future!



**"Sitting there won't cook the rice."
– Chinese proverb**

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