

#4

Discipline-based parenting helps create intimacy and an ability and willingness in kids to trust others. Punishment-based parenting creates distance, anger, and kids who are slow to trust others.

By now, you have no doubt noticed the recurring theme that runs throughout the discussion of the differences between discipline-based and punishment-based parenting. You may even have grown a bit weary of the repetitious reminder that consistency and predictability, along with clear and fair communication are so far the three most important characteristics found in discipline-based parenting that are absent in punishment-based parenting. Hopefully though, you have bought into just how important all three characteristics are to the task of raising emotionally healthy kids.

And by now you are probably getting a better idea as to which model your parenting efforts follow. If you are a parent who combines consistency, predictability, along with clear and fair communication about what it is you expect and what consequences they can expect, then you are doing much of what it takes to practice discipline-based parenting. If none of the three are of value to you, nor goals you strive for in your parenting efforts then it is likely that you fall into the camp described here as a punishment-based parent.

But before you resign yourself to that category of parenting, I encourage you to consider the other benefits that come not only to discipline-based parents, but to their kids as well.

Discipline-based parenting and intimacy

In addition to the benefits already suggested, discipline-based parents help develop in their kids the ability to be intimate in their relationships with others. Their capacity and desire to be vulnerable (which leads to intimacy) in relationships begins in learning that their parents can be trusted. As they grow and mature, they begin to apply what they learn and experience in their trusting relationship with Mom and Dad, to their relationships with others as well.

These parents recognize that it is important to instill in their kids the ability and willingness to trust them. They know and take seriously the role they play in helping to create in their kids a willingness to trust them. And they know too, that this ability to trust early in life sets the stage for trust and intimacy in their future relationships with others as well. And as their kids grow and mature, these

parents enjoy the added benefit of seeing the trust they have helped create in their kids, show up and develop in their friendships and relationships with others.

They teach their kids trust by applying the ingredients of discipline-based parenting: (here we go again!) their actions have become predictable to their kids because they have been consistent with them; they have also made it a habit to communicate their expectations and consequences clearly and fairly to them. As a result, they know where they stand and they know what they can expect from Mom and Dad. This creates in them a strong sense of emotional security and safety which in turn allows them to trust their parents, and eventually others as their world around them expands. Of course not everyone they encounter during the course of their life will be worthy of being trusted, and their ability to wisely pick and choose is another issue.

While discipline-based parents understand the importance of establishing a trusting relationship with their kids, they accept that their success may at times seem to be a hit and miss proposition at best. It might even seem like an up hill battle at times.

They know that it is normal (but they don't have to like it!) to at times be the target of a bit of anger and resentment from their kids. They remember too though, that eventually their efforts will pay off in the form of a warm and mutually respectful, intimate and trusting relationship with them. They are motivated and encouraged through the tough times by their belief that eventually (the phrase, "this too shall pass" comes to mind) they will enjoy the benefits of a trusting and intimate relationship with their kids.

Punishment-based parenting and intimacy

Punishment-based parents either do not see the value in developing a mutually trusting and intimate relationship with their kids, or they do not know how to achieve it. In either case, what develops in their kids is fear of being close and a need to protect them selves. The need to protect and the ability to trust do not usually go hand in hand, and protecting them selves usually wins out over trusting others.

These parents usually experience a consistent and hefty dose of distance and insulation in their relationship with their kids. But contrary to what is often claimed, the distance created by their kids is not usually a result of failing to get what ever it was they wanted from Mom and Dad, or because they have been disciplined. Instead it is a result of having concluded in the midst of the conflict that it is unsafe to trust; being close is not an option for them. Instead they protect.

Usually their distance and insulation is accomplished by creating walls and barriers between them selves and their mom and dad. (and eventually between them selves and others). Rather than wanting to be close because they trust, they withdraw, they pull back and they insulate themselves from whatever it is in their relationship they fear.

What's a parent to do?

It's 7:45 on Monday morning. With your mind already full of things that need to be done that day at the office, you jump into your car, put it in reverse and head down the drive way. Before you reach the street, you hear a crunching sound. Immediately you know what it is you hit. You know because many times you have told your 9 year old son to put his bicycle away after riding it. And many times you have warned him, threatened him and explained to him what could happen if he left it on the drive way. Your anger and frustration is for a moment set aside by your relief in the fact that you just left your son at the breakfast table so you know he wasn't on the bike when you hit it. Having enjoyed that moment of relief in knowing he is safe, your frustration and anger over his carelessness and disobedience kick in.

The discipline-based parent will respond to this situation something like this:

(Knowing the timing isn't good for him to go back in to deal with the problem right now, he decides to wait until after work and school and to talk with his son then).

5:36 Monday evening: "Jason, you probably noticed your smashed bike lying next to the garage this morning. When I backed out this morning I ran over and completely destroyed it. After being relieved for a moment in knowing you weren't on it when I hit it, I have to tell you that I was not only disappointed that you had once again left it in the way of the cars, but I was angry with you as well.

I have told you many times that I expect you to take responsibility for the care of your bike and to put it away after you use it. Mom and I have both promised that if you fail to take care of it that we would take it away from you for a while.

Well we don't have to take it away since it is too damaged to be fixed. You will no longer have the privilege of riding your bike since it can't even be fixed. Your next bike will be on you so start saving. In the mean time, because of your irresponsibility, I want you home right away every day after school for the rest of the month. I will have some extra chores for you and while you do them, I want you to think about what it means to appreciate and to be responsible for the things you are privileged to have. Then let's talk about what you have learned and

decided about how you will handle your possessions from now on. I might even have some suggestions for you as to how you could earn some extra money to buy a new bike.

I do still trust you and I can't even tell you how relieved I was in knowing you weren't on your bike when I hit it (this might be a good time for a hug!). I have confidence in you and your desire to be responsible, but you have got to follow through in your efforts.

And of course I still love you, and now that I've been able to get this off my chest, I don't even think I'm angry any more. Nonetheless, I do want you to learn something from this".

The punishment-based parent would handle the situation in a way similar to the following:

(Although he is now late for work, he storms back in anyway):

"How could you be so stupid Jason? What person in their right mind leaves their bike right behind a car? Don't you know the damage a car makes to a bike when it runs over it? Get a clue Jason. Life doesn't work very well when you are so irresponsible. Looks like we won't have a bike to worry about for a while because I'm sure not going to shell out more money just so you can take advantage of my generosity"

All of this is followed by three days or so of silence from dad, along with a mood that is designed to teach a lesson by withholding himself from his son.

In the mean time, Jason is (once again) so hurt by Dad's ridicule that he withdraws just a little more. Even though he knows he was wrong in leaving his bike in harm's way, he doesn't believe he deserves the pain inflicted by his dad's comments. So he protects himself by placing yet another stone in the wall that he began to build in response to past personal attacks from Dad; he has learned again that it is not safe to trust his dad's responses.

Once again, it takes far more ink and space to describe the response of the discipline-based parent than it does the punishment-based parent. The fact that it does, adds further to the evidence that doing parenting the right way really does take up more of our time. In the long run however, time and certainly energy and emotional distress are saved by investing the time and energy early on.

So what's the bottom line?

A valuable benefit we can count on coming our way as a result of following the discipline-based parenting model is a relationship between ourselves and our kids

that enjoys a significant amount of mutual trust. And when the desire and ability to trust is established while they are still under our roof and authority, we can usually count on that closeness and intimacy which comes as a result of trusting, to continue throughout our lives with them.

And a secondary but equally important benefit will be our watching them apply the trust we helped establish in our relationship with them, to other future relationships as their world expands beyond us.

Creating this willingness for closeness and intimacy in our kids through a discipline-based parenting model is not always an easy task. And we will probably not usually see any immediate results but it is an important goal for any parent to continuously work toward in if their desire is to raise great and emotionally healthy kids.

Discussion Questions

When you were growing up, did your parents' reaction to your misbehaviors usually-at least eventually-lead to closeness or did it more likely lead to distance between you and them?

Do you see ways in which their responses to you when you disobeyed them either helped or hindered your ability to trust others today as an adult?

Do you see ways in which your ability/inability to have close relationships today is affected by how they reacted to you when they disapproved of how you were behaving?

As a parent to your kids today, do you see ways that your discipline/punishment style of responding is affecting them in terms of intimacy, trust and anger?

What are some specific ways you can adjust your responses so your style is more discipline-based rather than punishment based?