

#5

Discipline-based parenting takes place when parents are still in control of their emotions, while punishment-based parenting takes place out of anger, frustration, and with very little self-control.

Adding to our growing list of words that describe the most important differences between discipline-based and punishment-based parenting is self-control. Aside from CEO's of large corporations, and maybe presidents of countries, no one is busier than the parents of young kids these days. For most of us, the demands and responsibilities that come our way are relentless and unending. Just as one task is completed and one obligation is fulfilled, there are several more demanding our time, our efforts, and our attention.

Because we parents are so busy and often overwhelmed by the responsibilities of our role, it is all too natural for us to ignore misbehavior or disobedience that really should be addressed quickly, until finally it is too late to react in a rational and reasonable fashion. At this point, we are too far gone to consider and to include any the four key ingredients that are thus far found in our model for discipline-based parenting. Consistency, predictability, fair and clear communication and self-control are no where to be seen.

Hoping against hope, we tell ourselves that just maybe if we ignore it (their unacceptable behavior) a little longer, then it may just go away on its own. Finally, we are so worn down by whatever it is that is taking place that we respond out of anger and frustration, and are well out of control of both the situation and ourselves.

In order to avoid the affects of being worn down, it is important that when our kids need our correction, we act quickly, rather than hoping that it will fade on its own. It is often this quick action on our part that enables us to apply the fine art of discipline-based parenting, rather than to fall into the pattern of punishment-based parenting that occurs only after we have "lost it".

Discipline-based parenting

So another ingredient found in discipline-based parents is the timely response to unacceptable behaviors. As a result they are more likely to respond in ways that bring an end to what ever the unacceptable event they find them selves in. As a result of their early response, they are able to model for their kids the appropriate way to address a conflict. They are able to show that being out of control with their emotions when there is a conflict is not only unneeded, but destructive as well.

It is ironic, but discipline-based parents also understand that it is just as important to know what unacceptable behaviors and circumstances actually are better

resolved by waiting, rather than by reacting immediately. They know that there may be minor misbehaviors that can and should be ignored, and that it is not uncommon for them to go away on their own. They know that it is often a tough call to make but that as they effectively learn to ignore what can and should be ignored, that so many issues do become "non events" without their having to take a decisive and overt stand. These parents learn that sometimes, all it takes is "one of those looks" that sends the message that a change is needed.

Punishment-based parenting

Punishment-based parents usually do not respond to an unacceptable situation with their kids until they are close to their breaking point. Only then do they address the issues that are troublesome, and by then they no longer have the control that is necessary for bringing about a quick and relatively peaceful resolution. And since their reactions are usually heavily influenced by their emotions-usually anger and frustration-other problems and difficulties can grow out of their finally attempting to resolve the conflict. Gradually, with their increased irritation, along with the heightened intensity of the situation, they become increasingly more angry and frustrated until finally, until finally they respond in an exaggerated way that is usually out of proportion to the "evil deed" that has been committed.

Finally, after blowing sky high, the punishment-based parent gets the compliance they wanted but their kids are left thinking to themselves, "Where did that come from?", and they are left thinking that, "once again, it took my anger, my yelling, my losing it, to bring an end to the unacceptable behavior".

Punishment-based parents also lose out on the opportunity to be a model to their kids as an example of how to deal affectively with conflict while still under healthy control of themselves and their emotions.

What's a parent to do?

Consider the following scene familiar to parents all over the world:

You have clearly and calmly asked your kids to pick up their toys and to get ready for bed. It's obvious that they heard you but they continue to play. Once more, you ask with a calm and clear voice, stating also that you don't want to have to ask again.

The discipline-based parent has established a contract between them and their kids that goes something like this:

“You can count (remember the importance of consistency and predictability?) on the fact that I will always mean what I say when I say it calmly and in control the first time”.

Since this agreement is clear, in good working order, and is based on the key elements of discipline-based parenting, this parent will handle this challenge to their authority in a way similar to this:

Since they have asked twice with still no response, it is time to take calm and controlled action. They stop what they are doing, go over to where they are playing, kneel down to their level and they say the following: "I just asked you two times to clean up your toys and to get ready for bed. You aren't doing what I have asked you to do, and that is unacceptable. You have a choice to make. Either move right now to clean up your toys, and go get ready for bed, or..... (appropriate consequences are clearly stated). You have a choice to make. What's it going to be?"

The punishment-based parent has an altogether different contract agreement with their kids that goes something like this: "I do not really mean what I say until I get angry, and you don't really have to obey until you see that I mean it. I may ask twice, three times, or sometimes even eight or nine times. But you can wait to obey until you see that I am finally at the end of my rope". When that happens, I will then really mean what I say and all hell will break loose, you will obey, and there will be nothing to talk about".

It is on the basis of this punishment-based contract that these parents will handle the situation of putting away toys and getting ready for bed. And it will be in a very different way than what was described when the discipline-based parent is in charge:

Repeating a second time their expectation that they put their toys away and get ready for bed (with a slight increase in decibels) they get little if any response. A third time and with more force and anger in their voice, they state what it is they want; still no real movement in the direction of cleaning up.

Finally, red faced and at the top of their lungs, they repeat their demand that they clean up and get ready for bed. Low and behold, this fourth time they obey. But once again-just like last time this happened, they are left feeling angry and frustrated with their kids, and drained of what little energy they still had at the end of an already exhausting day. And once again, they are absolutely convinced that it was their anger and frustration that finally motivated their kids to do what they wanted them to do.

If my anger doesn't motivate my kids, then what does?

It is not our anger and frustration that motivates our kids to obey us. While it does appear that these emotions are the "change agent", it actually is their realization (finally!) that ".....mom now means it. She never really means it until she gets angry and frustrated. I know that from past experiences!"

While this is not really true-we really do mean it the first time-can you see how our kids may equate our finally really meaning business with an increase in the intensity of our emotions? Their reasoning goes something like this: "If Dad really meant it the first time, he would not ask a second time without (calmly and in control) giving me a consequence I can count on if I don't get up immediately and get ready for bed. And I would really believe he meant what he said if he followed through (again, calmly and in control) with the consequence if I don't comply!"

So what's the bottom line?

As usual, all of the efforts that are involved in discipline-based parenting are easier said than done. And time consuming? You bet. But in the long run, not only will this time consuming approach save time because your kids will learn that it is to their benefit to respond when first asked, but you will also avoid the anger, yelling, and elevated blood pressure that so often accompanies the alternative approach and model of punishment-based parenting that relies heavily on the build-up and expression of emotions to bring about obedience.

When we are in control of our emotions, we are more likely be in control of our reactions and responses in the midst of communicating our expectations to our kids. Because of the healthy control over the situation that we have, they are then more likely to respond in a timely fashion to what ever it is that we expect of them. We simply do not have to be out of control in order to convey to them that we mean business. In fact, the very opposite is true; our being in control of our emotions in the midst of discipline communicates to them that what is being asked must be taken seriously. And in addition to getting them to obey when first asked they will also likely learn the all-important lesson of cause-effect that is so important to the task of raising great kids.

Discussion Questions

Did your parents usually respond to your misbehaviors with self-control, or did they respond in a way that was clearly out of control?

Whether they acted in control or out of control, what do you think the affect was on you?

Does how your parents reacted to you have an affect on how you respond to your kids as a parent?

Whether you usually respond while still in control, or if you usually react after you have lost control, what affect do you see it having on your kids when they disobey?

What specific changes can you possibly make that will enable you to more affectively respond in a healthy fashion when your kids have misbehaved?