

#6

Discipline-based parenting sees unacceptable behaviors and challenges to authority as normal and even inevitable and uses both to teach important values, morals and expectations for kids to follow. Punishment-based parenting rejects the idea that challenges are both normal and inevitable, and seeks only to change unacceptable behaviors and attitudes while discounting the importance of teaching values and morals.

### **Discipline-based parenting**

Discipline-based parents look beyond just getting immediate behavior changes from their kids when they are misbehaving or in any other way challenging them. They recognize that any challenges that come their way will provide yet another opportunity for them to help shape and influence the internal moral and value compass of their kids.

These parents acknowledge that behavior and attitude changes in their kids are often necessary and called for, but they understand also that there is more to their role as an authority figure than simply bringing about those changes. In addition to expecting changes that are appropriate, they also seize the opportunity to teach values and morals in a way that will have benefits in the lives of their kids for years to come.

### **Punishment-based parenting**

Punishment-based parents on the other hand have just one primary goal and objective in mind when they correct their kids. Their efforts are limited to bringing an end to any and all of the unacceptable behaviors that may be taking place in their kids at the time. Simply stated, there is room for no goal in the midst of correcting, other than the goal of bringing about an immediate change of behavior or attitude in their kids.

These parents want to insure that any and all unacceptable behaviors will come to a screeching halt and that they will not happen again anytime soon. And they attempt to bring about their desired behavior changes by administering some kind of pain (almost any consequence will do as long as it is painful enough) to whatever the undesirable behavior may be. The idea in such thinking is that if their kids associate and experience enough pain along with their unacceptable actions, that those actions will stop and that they will not happen again anytime soon.

Behavioral psychology refers to this form of learning as “operant conditioning” and is a very popular and successful approach used in training animals. We have all seen dogs trained to not bark by temporarily using a “bark collar” that generates a shock when ever the dog barks. Bringing about the desired change does not usually take very long because any dog with just a little sense quickly realizes that, “when I bark, I get hurt. I don’t like pain, so I won’t bark anymore” .

I for one am grateful to the behavioral psychologist and the creative inventors who came up with such a device to teach dogs not to bark. But I am fairly certain that even though my neighbor’s dog no longer barks continuously, it has learned absolutely nothing about the rights that his neighbors have to live in a quiet neighborhood free of constant barking. Instead, his learning has been limited to, “when I bark, I hurt, so I will avoid pain by cooperating with my owner” .

This operant conditioning approach is common practice among punishment-based parents because it really does usually work in getting behavior changes in kids. But is anything else learned? And what harm may come along with any possible lessons learned?

Punishment-based parents teach their kids how to superficially act and behave in order to protect themselves from the immediate and unwanted pain of a consequence. But since the motivation for compliance is superficial, the results are seldom lasting. The results are usually limited to teaching very little else other than something like, “.....when I misbehave, I don't like how Mommy and Daddy respond to me”, or, “.....when I don't obey, I get hurt. I'd better obey next time to keep from getting hurt”. Their learning process and response is similar to how the dog learned from the pain inflicted on him by his shock collar.

### **What’s a parent to do?**

Many of the experiences we have with our kids will give us the opportunity to teach them the values and morals that are important, and that we believe they will need in life. A vast majority of those experiences that we will be able to use will involve our discipline of them when they have misbehaved or in some way challenged our authority.

When these inevitable events occur, discipline-based parents invest a great deal of their energy into communicating four messages. The first three have been presented and discussed earlier in Part II ( #1 and #2) but since they provide the foundation for accomplishing the fourth, they deserve another mention here.

First, discipline-based parents state clearly to their kids what attitudes or behaviors of theirs are unacceptable. Second, they communicate clearly to them why they are

unacceptable. Third, they do their best to leave no room for any misunderstanding as to what the consequences are (or will be). Fourth, these parents consistently look for ways of using the disobedience or challenge that has occurred as an opportunity to teach their kids the values and morals that are important to them.

Consider the following event that takes place in some form or another in most homes from time to time:

After the next door neighbors complained about pellet gun pellets hitting their house, Grant was told by his mom and dad that he could no longer use his pellet gun in the back yard. They made it clear that he was not being punished since he had done nothing wrong, but that it was important that they be responsible and respectful neighbors. He was told also that their decision was based strictly on the reasonable request for safety that was made of them by their neighbors.

A month later, the next door neighbor comes over to report that once again, a pellet had been shot in their direction and this time it took out a window over their kitchen sink.

The discipline-based parent would handle the situation something like this:

“Grant, The Swansons were just here and they told us that once again, a pellet hit their house. This time however, it broke their kitchen window. There is only one back yard that the pellet could have been fired from and I have to assume-unless you have evidence to the contrary-that you were shooting your gun in the back yard after we had told you this was not the proper place for target shooting. Did you shoot your gun in the back yard after we told you a month ago that you could no longer do so? (a quiet and quaking, yes, is uttered and the parents continue)

I can think of two reasons why you should not have used your gun in the back yard. And either one should have by itself been enough to persuade you to obey: first, I told you not to, and secondly, your own common sense should have told you that it was not safe to do. When you disobeyed, you not only challenged my authority but you also put our neighbor in danger.

There will be several consequences you will have to pay. First, you will be responsible for the cost of the window. In addition, you will go over and personally apologize and acknowledge that you were not respectful of their need and right for safety. You will also assure them that it will never happen again. Finally, you are no longer free to shoot your gun anywhere until all of the above has been accomplished and you and I have had a chance to talk about what you can learn from this”.

And now, the punishment-based parent’s response:

“I just had a very embarrassing encounter with the neighbors who told me that once again you have been shooting your pellet gun in the direction of their house. And this time you broke their kitchen window. Not only will you pay for the damn window, it’ll be a cold night in you know where before you ever see that gun again. Go to your room and I don’t even want to see your face again until I tell you to come out”.

Clearly this punishment-based parent made no effort to teach any important values but instead was motivated only by a determination that the unacceptable behavior would not happen again.

Once again, the amount of space and ink it takes to describe the reactions of a discipline-based parent, as compared to what it take for a description of the punishment-based parent, supports the notion that it really does take more time and effort to teach values and morals to our kids.

### **So what’s the bottom line?**

While it is our obligation and responsibility to at times bring about external attitude and behavior changes in our kids, the punishment-based parent focuses exclusively on the behavior changes and ignores the importance of also teaching morals and values.

Changes and adjustments in behavior and attitude are certainly both worthwhile and necessary goals for us to embrace and strive for, but the discipline-based parent recognizes that much more must also be accomplished.

None is more important to the health and well being of our kids than the goal of influencing the development of their values and morals. If we achieve this, our kids will be influenced by us in ways that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

Our kids come into our lives as "unfinished products" (come to think of it, they will go out of this world an unfinished product as well!). One of the many incomplete “parts to be assembled” are moral principles and values, and it is our task and responsibility as parents-in large part through dealing with their challenges of us-to help shape, mold and design them in such a way that helps develop in them the values and morals they did not come equipped with from birth.

Since our kids come into this world without a moral or value structure-not knowing the difference between right and wrong-does it not stand to reason that they will test, push and challenge in order to learn what ones work best in life? Discipline-based parents recognize both the inevitability, as well as the necessity of

this discovery process. Because of this understanding, there is less likelihood of overreacting and taking personally, the challenges that will come their way.

Since punishment-based parents do not view misbehavior and challenges as normal, they also fail to understand their usefulness or what they can accomplish through them. They are also more likely to take those challenges personally and to respond defensively and inappropriately. Responses such as, "look how you've made me look", and, "I can't believe you'd do this to me", are common.

Discipline-based parents, on the other hand, understand that when their kids challenge their authority, they are trying to discover where it is they belong and what's expected of them. As a result, these parents are far less likely to react defensively or to retaliate with pointless, inappropriate, and unfair punishment.

### **Discussion Questions**

When you were a kid growing up, did your parents view your challenging, misbehaving and questioning authority as a normal part of growing up?

Were your challenges and misbehavior seen by them as something that must be stifled, or was it used to shape you in a positive way?

As a parent today, do you recognize the inevitability-even the necessity- of your kids questioning and challenging you?

Do you find yourself responding in a way that will help teach values and shape character in your kids, or do you respond in a way that is solely designed to get behavior change?

What possible changes to your responses to unacceptable behaviors and attitudes need to be made in order to successfully shape the values and character of your kids?

