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Discipline-based parenting recognizes the differences between childhood mistakes, and challenges to their authority; punishment-based parenting does not consider the differences between the two.

Yet another task we are called on to perform as parents is to understand and evaluate before we respond, the difference between mistakes our kids make, and their challenges to our authority. Sometimes things go wrong because our kids have challenged our authority, while other problems or conflicts are simply a result of their making a childish mistake. As difficult as it is to always be right in our assessment, it is important that we try, since how we respond should be based on what we have determined in our evaluation; how we respond to their mistakes will be different than how we will respond to them and their challenges to our authority.

What makes this task of distinguishing between the two a difficult one for us parents is the fact that often the main characteristic that sets mistakes apart from willful defiance and challenges is the motivation and understanding behind them. But if we can successfully determine what their motivations are, and whether or not they really do not know or understand something, then we will more able to determine what our appropriate response should be.

### **Discipline-based parenting**

Discipline-based parents prepare for their response by taking the time to gather a little data. (I know, what parent has that kind of time, right?) If we determine that more than likely, the unacceptable behaviors of our kids are motivated by their need to, "show us who's really in charge here", then we must respond by showing them that, in fact, WE are in charge. If, in our judgment, their behavior is not an attempt to usurp our authority, but rather an error in judgment, an act of carelessness, or perhaps just silly childishness in general, then a different response on our part is called for.

### **Punishment-based parenting**

Punishment-based parents do not take the time to evaluate what the motivations might be for any unacceptable behavior before taking action. It doesn't usually matter to them whether a mistake is made or if they are being challenged. All that really matters to them is that something unacceptable just happened and that they want a change to be made. So what often happens is that kids get handed a punitive consequence for making a mistake that should have instead been addressed and dealt with only by correcting and teaching.

## What's a parent to do?

It is not an easy task, and few parents get it right all the time, but it is important that we attempt to assess whether or not our kids have just made a childhood mistake, or if they are acting in a defiant way in an effort to challenge our authority. There are usually hints and clues they give off in the look on their face and in their body language in the midst of the event.

Once we conclude that either one or the other is taking place, it is helpful to continue looking for the tell tale signs that usually accompany both innocent mistakes and willful defiance. And if in the middle of it all it becomes more evident that we have made a mistake in our judgment, it is ok and in fact necessary, to alter our responses. When we have concluded that our kids have made an error in judgment and behavior due to their immaturity and lack of knowledge or understanding then what is called for is patient and understanding instruction rather than any form of discipline or consequence.

On the other hand, if it is determined that our authority is being challenged and an attempt is being made to "show us who is really in charge, then what is called for is discipline and the possibility of consequences.

Since punishment-based parents do not take the time to distinguish between challenges and mistakes, they run the risk of ignoring or overlooking a serious challenge to their authority, while actually punishing for a mistake that is made due to ignorance, clumsiness, or childish error in judgment.

I am reminded of an incident that happened when our oldest daughter was three. It serves as a good example of how important it is for us to do the best we can to assess and evaluate whether our kids have made a childhood mistake because they have not yet learned what the situation calls for, or if they are challenging our authority.

We were guests at a friend's home and had just finished dinner and were ready to start in on a dish of ice cream that had been served for dessert. There was a bowl of chocolate syrup for anyone who wanted some to help them selves. The three-year-old son of our host was sitting next to our daughter. As the syrup was passed, he took a portion for himself, and then proceeded to put some on Ashley's ice cream. He just figured that since he liked chocolate, surely everyone else would like chocolate too. I suspect too, that he was putting out the effort to be a good little host.

Since Ashley didn't like chocolate, she kindly responded that she did not want her friend to put any on her ice cream. In spite of her declining his offer he continued

to do it any way. Immediately, the boy's father—who by the way was generally a great dad—hit his son's hand and chastised him for putting the chocolate on my daughter's ice cream when she didn't want it. He had mildly punished his son for a childhood mistake that called for instruction rather than a punitive approach. The little boy had simply not yet learned in his three short years of life, that it would have been better to ask his guest if she wanted chocolate on her ice cream, and then to respect her request.

A bewildered look came over the little boy's face, as if to say, "I don't get it. Did I do something wrong?" Then, within just a couple of seconds, the look of surprise and confusion was replaced with a look of defiance that said something like, "I'll show you!" At this point, our little host slapped back at his dad's hand, as if to even the score. Dad's response to his son's slapping at him was to ignore it and to act as if his authority had not been challenged. While the dad had punished his son for making a mistake, he went on to ignore his defiant will, and all in the time frame of about twenty seconds.

Certainly, this is a small and rather insignificant event. And every good parent has had these reactions from time to time. But it does serve as a description of how punishment-based parenting can confuse childhood mistakes that are made because their kids have not yet learned, with challenges to their authority that occur because they want to be in charge and in control.

### **So what's the bottom line?**

It is easy for any of us parents to forget that our kids—being the "new product" they are—can be clumsy, slow, careless, and awkward. Younger kids especially have not yet had many of the life experiences that will help them develop the social and physical skills they will need. If we take the time to distinguish between childhood mistakes, and defiance of our authority, then we will have made real progress toward raising great kids. If we do not, then our kids will run the risk of growing up with a broken spirit and a defiant will.

### **Discussion Questions**

When you were growing up, did your mom and dad do a good job in responding differently to your mistakes and to your challenges to their authority?

In what ways did they respond differently to each?

Do you see and understand the differences between your kids' mistakes and their attempts to usurp your authority?

How well (or poorly) do you do in making the distinction between mistakes and challenges to your authority before you respond?

What are some differences between your responses in both?