

Discipline is not a dirty word

Professor Matt Sanders

FOR MANY PEOPLE THE WORD “DISCIPLINE” IS ASSOCIATED WITH AUTHORITARIANISM — THE STERN PARENT GLARING DOWN AT YOU, ADMONISHING AND THREATENING, READY TO HAND OUT A FITTING PUNISHMENT FOR YOUR “CRIME”.

It was this type of Dickensian thinking that led many parents in the 1960s and 70s to reject entirely any notion about saying “no” to their children, as they felt it would in some way harm their child’s development.

Yet “no” is one of the first words children learn, and if they don’t learn the meaning of it they can often be at risk for developing behaviour difficulties.

Many parents today remain confused about disciplining their children. They understand that smacking can cause problems if used in anger and that ultimately it models aggression. But when a single alternative such as ‘time out’ is tried instead, this sometimes doesn’t appear to do any good either.

One particular couple I know of handled the parenting of their four-year-old son without incident but ran into trouble when their second son reached the age of two and started throwing repeated tantrums. Their mother had read numerous popular child-rearing books and even studied childhood development as part of her professional training.

She tried calmly talking and reasoning with the child, and when that didn’t help resorted to a firm smack on his bottom. Eventually she found herself hitting her child a number of times and having angry shouting matches with both her two-year-old and four-year-old as the household fell into a state of near anarchy.

So what was she to do? Was she disciplining her children too much, or not enough?

The answer is neither of these alternatives.

Discipline isn’t about whether you smack or not. It is about helping children learn that there are consistent consequences for their actions that will be enforced within a predictable, nurturing, and loving environment. No form of discipline is going to work unless that essential family relationship is first in place. And while the use of time out was popularised through the 1980s as a panacea, it is only one of a number of possible ways of dealing with behaviour that you wish to discourage.

Discipline is however an essential part of raising children, as indeed it is an essential part of adult life. Discipline within one’s self gives us the ability to achieve personal goals, plan for the future, work toward longer term rewards and to sense security in an ever-changing world.

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Likewise, children do best when they know the limits, boundaries and ground rules of their family environment and when these limits are fair and open and, as they get older, negotiable. The way you discipline your children will necessarily vary with the age and personality of that child. For instance you can't negotiate bedtime with a three year old, you can with a 14 year old.

Discipline for disobedience should always teach two things. Firstly, that "no" means to stop the behaviour that is not allowed and secondly, what appropriate behaviour should be seen instead.

The trap that many parents fall into when dealing with misbehaviour is to unwittingly feed negative behaviour by nagging and criticising, often inconsistently, and by failing to praise and encourage children when they behave well.

A positive parenting course eventually helped the couple mentioned above by allowing them to see what things they were doing that were right, and what things needed to be done differently. Over a number of weeks, by changing the parents' behaviour and through learning more about how to look at their own actions, their two-year-old's behaviour also changed. The household calmed down, and everyone was much happier.

It isn't magic that brings about these results, just effort, and an understanding that we all need a little help sometimes.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.