Fostering Self-Discipline in Children: Communicating Expectations and Rules

What is Self-Discipline? Children who are self-disciplined judge what is right and wrong based on reasoning, concern for others, and an understanding of acceptable and unacceptable conduct.

How Self Discipline Evolves
- People do not achieve self-discipline immediately or all at once. Children proceed from depending on others to regulate their behavior for them to achieving greater degrees of self-regulation.

Amoral Orientation
- Children are born with no concept of right or wrong; they are amoral. They are not able to make ethical judgments about their actions.

Adherence
- Adherence is the most superficial degree of self-discipline and occurs when people rely on others to monitor their actions closely.
  - Baby Leroy’s mother puts her glasses beyond the child’s reach. Leroy can no longer pull on them
  - Three-year-old Nary is running in the classroom. The teacher takes her hand and walks with her to the block area, helping her to slow down.
  - The playground supervisor separates two kindergartens who are pushing to get on the swing next. The children stop pushing.
  - When, Gary, age 4, takes three cookies at snack, the provider says, “Remember each person may have two cookies to start.” Gary puts one cookie back.
  - When Nary runs in the classroom, the teacher reminds her to walk. Nary slows down.
  - The teacher’s aide provides Morris with a script he can use to tell another child he wants a turn on the swing instead of pushing. Morris says, “Can I go next?”
- Another form of adherence occurs when people follow a rule of expectation to gain a reward or to avoid a punishment (Hoffman, 1988; Kohlberg, 1976; Shaffer & Kipp, 2006).

Identification
- A more advanced degree of self-discipline occurs when children meet behavior expectations so they can be like someone they admire. Children’s compliance with certain expectations may also be a strategy for establishing or preserving satisfying relationships with those persons. This phenomenon is called identification and it happens for several reasons. First, children want to be like the people they revere. Second, children assume they are like the model. Third, children experience emotions similar to those they experience in the model. Finally, children act like the people they admire. In every case, the persons with whom the youngsters identify are nurturing, powerful people – usually adults or older children.
- Identification is important in children’s lives. It moves them beyond the simple formula of rewards and punishments and provides them with many of the ideas and standards they will carry with them into adulthood.

Internalization
- Internalization is the most advanced degree of self-discipline. When people treat certain expectations as a logical extension of their own beliefs and personal values, we say they have internalized those expectations.
- Once children have internalized an expectation, they have a guide for how to behave appropriately in all kinds of circumstances, even unfamiliar ones.
• Internalization should not be confused with unquestioning adoption of others’ rules and practices (Turiel, 1998). True internalization, requires people to think for themselves and to regulate their actions in accordance with the ideals they value.

• When does internalization happen? Internalization evolves gradually and takes many years to develop.

• Even though we can expect children to demonstrate more self-discipline as they mature, children do not move from an amoral orientation to higher levels of conduct strictly according to age.

• Do all people internalize everything? The answer to this question is no. In fact, a very small number of people never advance beyond the amoral level of compliance (Magid and McKelvey, 1990).

Developmental Processes That Influence Self-Discipline

• There are many reasons why children’s capacity for self-discipline increases with age. The most notable of these are changes in children’s emotional development, cognitive development, language development, and memory skills.

Emotional Development

• Two emotions that strongly contribute to self-discipline are guilt and empathy. Guilt feelings warn children that a current or planned action is undesirable. Guilt prompts regret for past misdeeds. Empathy or feeling a little of what another person feels, conveys the opposite message. Empathy causes children to initiate positive actions in response to emotional situations.

• Guilt. The situations that arouse guilt evolve from simple, concrete incidents in toddlerhood to abstract, complex situations in later adolescence. As children mature, the main things that make people feel guilty are related to personal standards, rather than failing to satisfy other people’s expectations.

• Empathy. The beginnings of empathy are also present early in life. Empathic feelings occur when children identify with another person’s emotions and feel those emotions themselves. Infants express empathy to other children by simply mimicking their distress. By the time children reach the age of ten to twelve years, they demonstrate empathy for people with whom they do not interact directly.

Cognitive Development

• Children’s ability to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors evolves in conjunction with changes in their cognitive powers.

• Children’s notions of right and wrong become more sophisticated over time. Toddlers tend to use rewards and punishments as their primary criteria for determining if their actions or that of another child is right or wrong.

• Children’s perspective-taking abilities become more accurate with maturity. To interact effectively with others and to make accurate judgments about what actions would be right or wrong in particular situations, children must understand what other people think, feel, or know. Called perspective taking, this capacity is not fully developed in young children.

• Children’s categorization skills improve with age. Children ages two through six think of social incidents as totally separate events and do not easily make connections among them.

• Centration influences children’s social conduct. Throughout early childhood, children tend to direct their attention to only one attribute of a situation, ignoring all others. This phenomenon is known as centration.

• Concepts of cause and effect impact self-regulation. Children must be able to predict the probable outcomes of a vast array of social behaviors in order to make judgments about which actions to take and which to avoid. It is up to adults to point out the cause-and-effect
relationships to children and help children recognize the results of the various actions in which they engage.

- Irreversibility affects children’s efforts to comply. Toddlers and preschoolers do not routinely mentally reverse actions they initiate physically. Their thinking is irreversible. This means they are not proficient at readily thinking of an opposite action for something they are actually doing.

Language and Memory Development
- Not only is the capacity for self-discipline affected by children’s emotional development and cognitive capabilities, but language, private speech, and memory play roles in the process too.
- Language. The phenomenal rate of language acquisition during the childhood years plays a major role in children’s development of internal behavior controls.
- Private speech. Children also use private speech as a means for self-regulation (Berk and Winsler, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). They talk out loud to themselves as a way to reduce frustration, postpone rewards, or remind themselves of rules.
- Memory skills. Memory is another variable that influences self-discipline.

How Experience Influences Self-Discipline
The reasons for variation in their compliance with societal expectations can best be attributed to differences in experiences. Children learn the rules of society from others through direct instruction, observation, reinforcement, punishment, and attribution (Berreth and Berman, 1997).

Direct Instruction
- Throughout childhood, adults regulate children’s behavior using physical and verbal controls. These are forms of direct instruction. Verbal instructions are the quickest way to let children know what the appropriate, inappropriate, and alternate behaviors are.

Modeling
- Adults model a code of conduct through their own actions (Bandura, 1991).
- Setting a good example is an important way of teaching children right from wrong. Modeling is most effective when the model’s behavior is obvious to children.
- Verbal descriptions of modeled behaviors are especially valuable when the adult hopes children will recognize that a person they are watching is resisting temptation or delaying gratification.
- Modeling not only accentuates the positive actions; children also learn from the negative models they observe.

Reinforcement and Negative Consequences
- Reinforcement involves providing some consequences to a behavior that increases the likelihood the child will repeat that behavior in similar situations. Negative consequences are ones that reduce the probability of a particular behavior being repeated.

Attribution
- Attribution is a verbal strategy adults use to affect how children think of themselves and thus their behavior. Adult attitudes and verbalizations have a profound impact on children’s self-image and eventually influence the extent to which children believe they are capable of demonstrating socially acceptable, self-controlled behavior.

Integrating Development and Experience
- Children mentally chart their experiences and make a note of which behaviors make them feel guilty, which make them feel good, which are rewarded, and which are not, and under what circumstances those conditions apply. Gradually, this map grows in breadth and complexity.
- Other children also contribute data to children’s understanding of what constitutes desirable and undesirable behavior.
How Adult Behavior Affects Children’s Behavior

All adults rely on instruction, modeling, rewards, punishments, and character attribution to teach children how to behave.

Control refers to the manner and degree to which adults enforce compliance with their expectations. Maturity demands involve the level at which expectations are set. Communication describes the amount of information offered to children regarding behavior practices. Nurturance refers to the extent to which adults express caring and concern for children.

The Authoritarian Discipline Style

- Adults in the authoritarian discipline style put all their energy into the action dimension of the socialization process. They spare little time for facilitation. To achieve the high standards they have for children’s behavior, they are vigilant rule enforcers who value children’s unquestioning obedience above all else. Children whose primary experiences are with authoritarian adults generally become unfriendly, suspicious, resentful, and unhappy. They tend to be underachievers, to avoid their peers, and to exhibit increased incidents of misconduct, as well as more extreme acting-out behaviors.

The Permissive Discipline Style

- Permissive adults emphasize facilitation at the expense of the action dimension of the helping relationship. Adults see themselves as resources to children but not as active agents responsible for shaping children’s present or future behavior. Permissive adults provide little instruction to children about how to behave. Children subjected to this approach show few signs of internalization. They have little chance to develop feelings of empathy for others because cause-effect relationships are not explained. In adolescence, this style is frequently associated with delinquency and poor academic performance.

The Uninvolved Discipline Style

- Uninvolved adults are indifferent to the children in their care. They do not put any energy into relating to children or into guiding children’s social behavior. These grownups are self-absorbed, focusing on their own needs at the expense of the children’s. Neglectful adult behavior leads to many of the same outcomes described for children subjected to a permissive approach. As children grow older, they tend to be non-compliant, irresponsible, and immature. They also are low performers academically.

The Authoritative Discipline Style

- Adults in the authoritative discipline style combine the positive attributes of the authoritarian and permissive styles, while avoiding the negative ones. They respond to children’s needs with warmth and nurturance; they have high standards and establish clear behavioral expectations. Authoritative adults establish high standards for children’s behavior, but gear their expectations to match the children’s changing needs and abilities. The authoritative discipline style is the one most strongly associated with the development of self-discipline in children. Children know what is expected of them and how to comply.

Implications

- From a child’s point of view. If children were to rate the various discipline styles just described, how might they judge each one? Inductive methods were the disciplinary strategies most preferred by children of all ages. Physical punishment came in as the second best approach with love withdrawal being favored by no one.

A cross-cultural approach

- Becoming Authoritative

- We now know that although some people’s personality or temperament seem more aligned with one style or another, through training and practice any adult can learn to be more authoritative.
Stating Your Expectations
Adults can best express their behavioral expectations for children through a personal message. A personal message consists of three parts.
1. The first is a reflection in which the child’s point of view is acknowledged.
2. In the second portion, the adult articulates his or her emotions about the child’s behavior, names which specific action prompted those feelings, and explains why.
3. The third segment, used only in situations in which behavior change is desired, involves describing an alternate behavior for the child to pursue.
4. This last step is, in fact, a statement of a rule that the child is expected to follow for that situation.

Personal messages help children better understand how their actions affect others and provide them with cues about desirable and undesirable behaviors.

Knowing When Behavior Change Is Necessary
- Adults are faced with situations in which they must decide whether or not a child’s behavior is appropriate. If a behavior is not acceptable, they must also determine what conduct would be more suitable. In order to make these decisions, the following questions must be asked:
  (1) Is the child’s behavior unsafe either for self or others?
  (2) Is the child’s behavior destructive?
  (3) Does the child’s behavior infringe on the rights of someone else?
If the answer to any of these questions is yes, it is a clear sign that the adult should intervene (Galambos-Stone, 1994).

Part One of the Personal Message
- To successfully teach children how to achieve their aims appropriately, adults must first understand what children are trying to accomplish. The first step of the personal message is to recognize and acknowledge the child’s perspective using a behavior, paraphrase, or affective reflection.
- First, in problem situations, adults and children often have very different points of view.
- Another advantage of reflecting first is that it serves as a clear signal to the child that the adult is actively attempting to understand his or her position.
- A third value of reflecting first is that it is a way to mentally count to ten before committing yourself to a particular line of action.
- Finally, reflecting is a way for adults to show their respect and caring for children.

Part Two of the Personal Message
- The second portion of the personal message describes the adult’s emotions, identifies the child’s behavior that led to those feelings, and gives a reason for why this is so.

Why Adults Should Talk about Their Emotions
- Experienced practitioners learn to use their own emotions as a guide to interacting more effectively with children. Talking about emotions also aids children in learning that people have different reactions to the same situation.
- Adults who wish to maintain positive relationships with children also should keep in mind that sharing their feelings with children promotes closer ties.
- Children are interested in how the significant adults in their lives react to what they say and do.
- Focusing on children’s behavior. Once adults have described their emotions, it is important that they tell the child which behavior caused them to react. Behaviors are actions you can see.
- The importance of giving children reasons. Children are better able to understand and respond to adult expectations when these expectations are accompanied by reasons. Reasons help children see the logic of expectations that they might not discover on their own. Reasons
offer children information about the effect their behavior has on others. Reasons make the connections among actions clearer. Children can only internalize standards that make sense to them and that help them to predict the possible aftermath of the things they do or say.

- Matching reasons to children’s understanding. A child’s current developmental level has an impact on what types of reasons will make the most sense to him or her.
- Variations in part two of the personal message. Adults should always reflect first and then proceed with the second part in a way that seems most comfortable for them.

Part Three of the Personal Message

- Telling children an appropriate course of action for a particular circumstance is the function of the third portion of the personal message.
- Rules make the world more predictable because they help children recognize what they can and cannot do.
- Rules must be reasonable. Reasonable rules are rules children are capable of following. Being capable means having both the ability and the knowledge necessary to carry out the desired behavior. To create reasonable rules, adults must take into account children’s development, their past experiences, their current abilities, and the type of task required. In addition, rules must have long-term positive effects that benefit the child, not just the adult. Adults must continually reexamine their rules in an effort to keep them up to date. A rule that is appropriate for a child of four may be inhibiting at age six.
- Rules must be definable. Rules are definable when both the adult and the child have the same understanding of what the rule means. Good rules specify the exact behavior that adults value and find acceptable.
- Rules must be positive. Children are most successful at following rules that tell them what to do rather than what not to do or what to stop doing. Children are much more successful in following rules that help the redirect an action, rather than reversing or interrupting ongoing behaviors.

Positive Personal Messages

- A positive personal message contains only parts one and two of the format just described. Personal messages should be used to identify adults’ positive reactions as well. Adults must “catch” children being “good” – displaying behaviors that are socially desirable – and tell children what those behaviors are.
- Reformulating positive personal messages. Positive personal messages begin with a reflection. The purpose of a positive personal message is to teach children which behaviors they should retain for future use. The positive personal message is a teaching tool aimed at helping children internalize the constructive behaviors they display.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Talking in paragraphs—effective personal messages are brief and to the point. Laborious personal messages are ones children ignore. They get tired of listening and tune out.
- Failing to use the personal message for fear of making a mistake—adults may get tongue-tied at moments when a personal message would be appropriate. They dread stumbling over the words, getting the order wrong, or forgetting parts.
- Talking about personal feelings only in problem situations—some adults have a tendency to focus primarily on children’s mistakes.
- Giving up midway—Children do not always wait patiently to hear an entire personal message. Sometimes when this happens, adults become flustered and give up.
- Focusing on short-term rather than long-term goals—
- Making expectations known from a distance—when adults see children in threatening situations, their first impulse is to shout a warning. A better approach is to move quickly over to the child and state expectations in a face-to-face interaction.
• Waiting too long to express emotions—in an effort to avoid committing themselves to a line of action, some adults refrain from expressing less intense emotions and allow their emotions to build up over time.

• Disguising expectations—when adults feel nervous about telling children what to do, they often disguise their rules. Adults who use disguising tactics limit children’s chances to be successful.