

Proactive Parenting: February 2017

Discipline: Thoughts on Why, What, and How

"Start With Why", a thought provoking book by Simon Sinek, focuses on leadership in business and industry, but the main principles can be applied to countless areas of life, like a major concern of parents; discipline. So much has been written about 'how to' handle difficult behavior and 'what' strategies work best. Starting with fundamental questions of 'why' can give parents guideposts to help them navigate. The word discipline means 'to teach'. It's not something you 'do' to your children, rather something you help them develop over time. A central question to ask is, what do I want to teach my child and why? In other words what are the values and beliefs our family holds dear? A helpful lens is to see misbehaviors as opportunities for learning, Answers to 'why' will inform what and how. For example, if I give into whining or screaming, I teach that those behaviors get kids what they want. If I ignore those behaviors and kids know that I will answer when they are calm and using a regular voice, I teach appropriate ways to communicate. If I let kids have candy at the store when I've already said no, I teach them that I don't really mean what I say. If I let kids keep playing with blocks when they are grabbing from each other and knocking things down, I teach them that my rules don't really matter, and they are not responsible for their actions. Integrity is at the heart of parenting. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

The classic image of 'roots and wings' can provide some more direction. Striving simultaneously towards seemingly opposite goals of connection and independence makes parenting so challenging. The starting point is to cultivate a responsive, loving relationship with your child by spending time; playing, laughing, crying, consoling. Everyday moments, from the mundane to the magical, accumulate like deposits in a 'connection account", building capital for when you want to gain cooperation, or set and enforce limits. By as young as age two, parents also have to acknowledge and support a child's need for independence. When you are acting from a place of connection your disciplining strategies and responses will be more effective and will help children build skills needed to function in the world independently. Connection and independence go hand in hand. Unconditional love without clear expectations is as out of balance as demanding expectations without first investing time to build a loving relationship. Finally, while the long-term goal of discipline is to develop self-discipline, short-term goals involve maintaining calm authority, determining the needs of your child, and deciding on your course of action. When children are young parents provide an external 'locus of control'. To feel safe kids need to know who is in charge, and if they don't they will test you until they are clear about the 'house rules'. Over time, as you help children develop a moral compass the shift transfers to them. A developed internal 'locus of control' signals healthy self-discipline, which leads to healthy independent functioning.

So with this framework in mind, here are some tips for getting through the tougher moments in ways that will build connection and independence. Every child is different, so pick out some of these strategies and see what works.

Setting the Stage: (Big Picture)

- Invest the time to build loving and responsive relationships.
- Set clear, reasonable limits, appropriate for your child's developmental age
- Model, Expect, & Teach Respect: words & deeds
- Notice the positives
- Ignore negative behavior when possible (whining, tantrums, etc.)
- Explain expectations ahead of time: When you put your Legos away, Then...
- Make some expectations into habits, i.e. "we all pitch in!"
- Set up for success: limit toys, limits clothes to the current season, try not to shop when everyone is hungry & tired
- Allow extra time and provide warnings for transitions.
- Teach skills like cleaning up toys, problem solving, self-help skills- getting dressed, sharing, etc. Break big tasks into small ones
- Learn and teach calming techniques, deep breathing, counting to 10
- Avoid giving directions as a question if 'no' is not an option.
- Try to give choices when you can, i.e. blue socks or red socks?

During the Overture: (before the drama happens)

- Be alert for building frustration and resistance, redirect or distract
- When possible, try humor and playfulness to shift resistance to cooperation
- Shift gears, go outside, change the activity, Blow off steam!
- Remove "problem objects", i.e. a toy, TV remote, etc.
- Framing: You can choose to keep grabbing toys and find another place to play, or choose to use your words (teach what words)

The Drama has begun:

- Breathe! Try to stay CALM and access your "Thinking Brain"
- Time Away or Time Out if necessary for you? Your child? Both?
- Assess child's needs: tired, hungry, overwhelmed?
- Acknowledge and accept feelings- not misbehavior
- Frame the problem; Big Problem or Little Problem?
- If child is "calm", teach problem-solving skills. Listen and ask kids for ideas.
- If real resistance, use few or no words, no attention. Both "feed the flames"
- If behavior escalates: Decide; Natural or Logical Consequence?
- Follow through; Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say.

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