

TEACHERS OR TAUNTERS
THE DILEMMA OF PROVIDING TRUE
DISCIPLINE

Lorraine E. Fox, Ph.D., CCCW.

This article was originally published in Spring, 1987 in the Journal of Child and Youth Care Work, Vol. 3

TEACHERS OR TAUNTERS: THE DILEMMA OF TRUE DISCIPLINE

Lorraine E. Fox, Ph.D., CCCW

ABSTRACT: Direct caretakers of children and adolescents are continually challenged by the need to intervene with unacceptable behavior presented by those for whom the caretaker is responsible. This behavior is often emotionally and cognitively taxing, tempting the responsible adult to respond in ways that are punitive and/or unhelpful, rather than ways that teach children better means to their ends. The author contends that a thoughtful approach, blending firmness with kindness, with close attention to the goals and purposes of adult intervention, the mutuality of the process, the process of change, and the role of helping adults as change agents will promote ethical, helpful, and where appropriate, "professional" practices that are in the best interests of children and youth.

Parents of both young children and adolescent youth who present what are commonly called "behavior problems" seem to find themselves most taxed, frustrated, and challenged when confronted with what they see as unacceptable behavior. They then attempt to intervene in ways that will change such behavior. In conferences for professionals who work with children and adolescents, "behavior management" workshops are usually the first to fill up. Behavior management problems are usually the first to be raised by parents and foster parents in training classes and parent support groups. Direct care providers - whether parents, foster parents, day care workers or professional child care workers) search for a "bag of tricks" to use in "managing" the behavior of children in their charge. There are, indeed, some "tricks", or techniques as we prefer to call them, which are useful and necessary.

More important, however, from the point of view of this author, is a conceptual framework from which we can view behavior, and the goals for our interventions with disruptive, "inappropriate" (i.e. unacceptable), or even harmful behavior.

There are at least two great weaknesses resulting from an approach that relies on "formulas", or pre-determined techniques. One problem is that creative children and youth,

display behavior which does not necessarily follow a formula or predictable pattern. Even after 30 years of working with troubled and troubling children and youth, and hearing the stories of others during the past 15 years of training and consulting, I am continually amazed at the variations of expression children and adolescents find to convey their feelings, needs, issues, etc. A formula response cannot adequately address such creative expressions, and behavior is, after all, a form of communication. The other weakness is that if an adult tries an intervention that has been learned or decided upon in advance of a particular situation, and that intervention does not work, the adult often is left standing there feeling unnerved, overwhelmed and at a loss for what else to do.

When we are able to empathically understand seemingly troubled behavior, that is, when we can look at and try to understand behavior from a child/youth's point of view, and when we become clear about the **purpose** of the intervention with such behavior, we can learn to feel more competent and creative in designing and selecting techniques and interventions to achieve our objectives. Knowing how to **think** about both the purposes of behavior and of interventions with child/youth behavior is as important as knowing what to do. Informed thinking, and clear goal setting can result in feelings of competence and confidence for the adult, and helpful, effective and nonpunitive interventions for the young person.

Distinguishing between Discipline and Punishment

The terms discipline, punishment, and consequence are often used in discussion, and consequently in practice, as if they were the same. They are not. These terms are also frequently used incorrectly, to rationalize our interventions. It is my conviction that an important ingredient for either professional, or ethical, or plain good sense parenting interventions is the ability to be clear about the distinctions between these concepts, and then to administer each according to

deliberate plan and thoughtful intent.

The literal meaning of the term "to discipline" is "to **teach**"! True "disciples" are learners. If we intervene with behavior with any intent other than to teach, we are not administering true discipline!

According to Webster, "to punish" means to penalize, to cause pain, loss, or suffering for a wrongdoing; to treat in a harsh manner. Think of "punitive" damages. This literal meaning has often been lost or blurred, and phrases such as "positive punishment" have been invented. Even many "treatment centers" for children and youth, whose stated goal is to be "therapeutic", i.e. to heal hurt and hurting young people, have been guilty of creating harsh, punitive environments for children in the name of "treatment". Taking things away from children (points, "privileges", emotional support, etc.) hurts; it does not heal. Some working with young people have observed that "in the interest of efficiency, discipline has often been defined in simple but rigid terms", coming to mean the absence of something such as noise or movement, and the equating of discipline with strict obedience and submission (Silberman, 1970). A very popular author writing about the care of children has reminded us that the very definition of punishment implies that what is important is whether the "offender" experiences discomfort, not whether there is a logical connection between the offense and the discomfort (1980). Whittaker (1979), writing about environments for youth, observed that interventions called discipline or punishment often "conspicuously missed" a focus on the teaching of life skills.

A close, or even cursory view of our penal systems, designed to "teach people a lesson", boast an average 85% recidivism. People do not "learn" in prisons; they merely wait. And yet we persist in "punishing" our children, and even rationalizing such responses as treatment, and then become frustrated and angry when they show us that they have not "learned". Punishment,

if we are to be literal, is designed to hurt, not to teach.

Considering Consequences

The word "consequence" has the word "sequence" as its root. A consequence is "that which naturally follows" (Webster); "the effect, result, or outcome of something occurring earlier" (Random House). Imagine that I, a professional trainer, conduct a training session for a group who is less than thrilled with my performance. When I arrive home that evening I announce that I plan to relax from a taxing day by watching some television. My family announces that a call has come from my disgruntled trainees, and that since I did not please the group I will not, in fact, be viewing any television that evening. Is this a "consequence"?, or a "contrivance"? There is no "sequence" between displeasing a training class and being deprived of television viewing! How often do we provide "consequences" for children/youth that have absolutely **nothing** to do with their prior behavior! What does a loss of points have to do with a clean room? Or a broken window? How does the "privilege" of watching television relate to having trouble in gym class? Even more, how often do we "scheme" (i.e. contrive) to come up with a punishment for a child that we know will really **hurt**! I have heard people say, without shame, that they deprived a child of "the only thing s/he cares about". There are two possibilities for this deliberate infliction of pain: one, a misguided belief that the pain will have long term benefit and produce the desired change; the other, a wish to make a child "pay" for something, especially something we perceive that they have done **to us**, or that hurt us! Misunderstanding of the utility of real consequences often backfires on us as well. If we take away something really important to a young person, which may cause them embarrassment with their peer group or other social problems, we imagine that the child will sit in her/his room contemplating how their behavior has caused this situation. In fact, a child will use their not-yet-developed brain to

sort out the situation, which more often results in them deciding that you don't care how foolish they look in front of their friends, that you are just "mean", or that they, once again, have been seriously wronged by someone who is supposed to care about them. Children do not have adult brains in small bodies! The brain develops slowly; there's a reason adult status is granted at age 18 or 21. Children think like children! If the consequence is not related to the offense, there is slight chance that a child will make a logical connection between their predicament and their earlier actions. Further, a child left alone (a common "consequence" of being sent to their room) to "think about things" will often come to some strange conclusions, as well as some rather inventive ways to accomplish their ends next time. Further, in our emotional upheaval as a result of perceived "misbehavior", we often forget the well know axiom: that there is "nothing more dangerous than someone with nothing left to lose". Taking away that which means the most to a child leaves us with very little leverage in appealing to them when things get rough again!

Another fascinating observation is how frequently a pre-arranged "consequence" is, by its' very nature, completely unlikely to teach anything new. One of my all time favorites is suspending a child for missing too much school! Think of it: you don't like school, or you're having trouble getting along in school, well here's your consequence - you can't come to school! Excuse me? Or, how about hitting kids when we catch them hitting other kids, to teach them not to hit!

Clarifying the Goals of Intervention

Once clear about the distinctions between discipline (which we will define as an intervention designed to teach a new behavior or way of thinking), and punishment (which we'll define as interventions designed merely to impose penalties or discomfort), we can move more easily into a consideration of the purposes or goals for adult intervention (sometimes

interference) with unacceptable behavior.

Teaching Values

A consideration of the **intention to teach** is important here. One might argue that we cannot avoid teaching, even when administering punishment. In a sense, it is true that a child learns something from every interaction, even if what s/he learns are lessons such as: adults can be cruel, might often triumphs over right(s), children "deserve" to be hurt when adults are angry, etc. Unfortunately, many children have already "learned" many lessons about the world that we wish they hadn't learned. Hurtful early experiences often taught children that the world is unsafe and cannot be trusted. Television teaches some very confusing messages about how to solve problems. Adults owe it to children to clarify what, exactly, they want to teach them about life, values, the world and relationships. At the same time that we want to teach them that certain behaviors have certain real consequences, can't we also teach them, **at the same time**, about the reality of fairness, available warmth and caring, that skill in anything takes time to develop, that old patterns are hard to change but that they can be changed? Children who have already tasted the pain and coldness of life do not need to learn about the harsh realities of life, but about the counter-realities. Children confused by media, other families, and their own thinking need to learn about our values. Values cannot be given to our children, they can only be offered. We know that many of us do not value things and ideas that others tried to "give" us. Most of us have had the experience of having someone we care about reject one of our values. Values, ultimately, are chosen. Children can only choose those values they are offered. Intervening with children and youth around their behavior provides a golden opportunity to demonstrate those values we believe in and would like our children/youth to accept. Each adult, before administering any consequence for behavior, wants to learn to ask: "What am I teaching this

child at this moment? What is s/he learning from my behavior in response to her/his behavior? What do I want, or need, to teach this child at this moment? What can I do that will truly be helpful to them in getting better control over their thoughts or behavior, or that will help them to make better choices next time?"

Learning How to Meet Basic Needs

Discipline requires the ability to separate **motive** from **action**. We know, but sometimes forget, that **all behavior is purposeful**. Even though we sometimes claim it in our frustration, nothing is ever done "for no reason at all". Behavior is tied to a goal; to meeting a need. It often takes considerable skill to see and understand the meaning a particular behavior has to a child. It takes patience, and respect to learn young person's motives. Many times we decide what a child was "up to"; and many times I think we are wrong. Learning to discover the motives of behavior is crucial in view of the aims of discipline, since we can't teach another way of meeting a need until we know which need the behavior was directed at meeting. Sometimes it's as simple as asking! It's amazing how often we don't bother. Sometimes it's true that even the child doesn't know exactly what s/he was wanting or needing that prompted a particular behavior. That's why they need us! They don't need us to slap penalties on them as much as to help them figure out what they wanted/needed and were trying to get, and how they can go about getting it without being disruptive, destructive or disobedient. Frankly, I have never seen a child or young person who wanted or needed anything "bad". I have always been able to approve of the **need** they were trying to meet, if not the method they chose to meet the need. Kids want what we want. Maslow (1954) taught us that human needs are "basic", intrinsic, part of being human; these needs are uniform across age groups and cultures. Kids do what they do to try to meet their needs. They want to stay alive, they want to feel safe, they want to belong, they want to be

noticed, they want to be loved, they want to feel competent. I believe that many times kids simply don't know how to get what they want in a way that is acceptable to us and healthy for them. When they haven't been taught to meet their needs successfully, the behavior "backfires" on them: not only do they not get what they were after, but they get a lot they didn't bargain for. They seek acceptance, and get rejection. They try to do something to feel competent, and when it doesn't work and they get yelled at, they feel guilty and worthless. When kids **try** to meet their needs, even in clumsy, unsuccessful, or unacceptable ways, they provide fertile ground for teaching and learning: For discipline.

Stop vs. Start

Punishment is about stopping ("stop that right now or else....")! Discipline is about starting ("what else could you do? try this next time"). In this way, discipline allows us to reaffirm while correcting. I can support what you want and need. I cannot support your current methods, but I can teach you ways to meet your needs that will benefit you, the others around you, and our relationship. Even after commands to stop, children will continue doing what they know until they learn something else. A corrective teaching interaction allows us to be very clear and firm about expectations for acceptable behavior, while allowing the youngster to learn more skillful and acceptable ways to achieve their motives. Frankly, it would be cruel to punish a child for not being able to play classical music on an instrument if we've never provided music lessons. Likewise, it is probably cruel to punish a child for not using a behavior they haven't learned yet. Now, if you have ever been so foolish as to allow a child to take music lessons while living in your house, you know that the learning is **not** music to your ears. Early attempts are rather unpleasant. Similarly, teaching new behaviors to a child and watching them "practice" is not always easy. Learning to type means a lot of misspelled words at first. Learning new

behaviors requires tolerance for the approximations that will eventually lead to the desired performance. The same applies when we attempt to teach different ways of meeting needs when a child/adolescent has learned to meet them in ways we find we cannot, or are not willing to, tolerate. Discipline allows us to move into and past a specific behavior in one interaction. Rather than simply punishing a child for throwing rocks and issuing commands that they stop throwing rocks (which will no doubt be ignored if there is no new learning, or they will just throw something other than rocks), discipline allows us to confront the behavior, impose a meaningful, related consequence. For example, the child will pay for something that was broken and/or will help to repair it. We will also work with the child on how the behavior has backfired ("you wanted to let me know that you were angry and now you've lost your allowance to pay for the broken window"). In combination with the consequence, we'll try to teach a new behavior ("what else could you do to let me know how angry you are"?). so that feelings can be handled differently next time. This approach will build confidence and sustain a positive, even if temporarily uncomfortable, relationship.

Very often, caring parents and substitute parents find that they suffer almost equally when a child they love is suffering. (Indeed, sometimes it **does** hurt us as much as it hurts them, although they'll never believe it, just as we didn't). Moving from punishment to discipline not only helps children, it helps those of us who love them and want to help them. Even if a child is unhappy now, if we can see clearly how our "consequence" has a good possibility of teaching them a better way next time, we also feel better.

Correcting Faulty Notions

Finally, when considering the goals of intervention, we want to remember that many children do not see the world the way we do. This may be true for developmental reasons. This

is always true for all children who have been deliberately hurt or ignored in the past, or for those who are currently living in hurtful situations. Children with "damaged egos" (sense of self), from past or current life circumstances, are **unable (not unwilling!)** to see things as we see them, or as we would like them to see them. One of the tasks of discipline for young people with fragile egos, a distorted and damaged sense of self, and a frequently hostile/suspicious view of adults and the world, is to learn something different as a result of our interventions and interactions. It's as if some children's egos are similar to damaged eyes. People who need glasses to see distances are not **refusing** to see things, they are simply unable to see them without assistance. We could threaten them, bribe them, take away privileges from now until forever, but they would still be unable to see distances with the eyes they have. It's not fair to "demand" that they see a distant object and describe it to us until we provide them with glasses. It's not fair to "demand" that young, or troubled, or disturbed, or hurting children see the world as we do, unless we provide them with some new "emotional glasses". This cannot be done by hurting them: It must be done by **teaching** them.

It's not easy to teach a different, more accurate way of perceiving things. It's easier, frankly, to avoid the challenge and just send them to their room, or put them on restriction, or deny them a part of child life (such as recreation) that we decide to call a "privilege". These punitive actions, however, will only serve to reinforce their notions of the world. Discipline will afford an opportunity to give what children deserve - "lessons" in life from those who have had the time to learn some things, figure things out, develop skills in reaching goals in ways that work, without hurting self or anyone else. Life lessons, any lessons, cannot be learned sitting alone in a vacuum. Sending a child away, or into a corner, to "think about it" isn't effective for learning. Children need a teacher, a tutor, a guide. That's you. That's "us".

Discipline is a Mutual Process

Discipline requires an **interaction**: it requires a teacher and a learner. It requires mutual effort: it requires positive motivation on the part of adult and child. Discipline is not something that can be **done to** someone.

My experience is that attention with regard to discipline is usually focused primarily or entirely on the child/teen. This seems to me not only unfair, but also not helpful, since the child/teen accounts for only one-half of the necessary exchange for discipline to occur. For true discipline to occur, I believe, we must spend as much time and energy examining our own motives and behaviors as we do the youngsters. It appears that failure to acknowledge the mutuality of needs and emotions accounts for much of the punishment that occurs in lieu of nonpunitive discipline. At any moment in time, both child(ren) and adult(s) are behaving in ways that are designed to meet personal needs. Adult needs for safety, belonging, love, esteem (competence) etc., are no less powerful or commanding than those of children. Neither are they more powerful. Often a problem arises in adult/child interactions because the behavior of the child/youth interferes with, or threatens, our feelings of safety, our need to feel loved, or to feel good about our abilities. For this reason, it requires extra effort on the part of the adult (who will be the teacher) to keep the needs of the children foremost - evidenced by providing discipline rather than punishment. When we are tempted to feel like children/teens are doing what they're doing "against us", or "to us", or that our love/care for them is not being returned, or we as adults become doubtful about our abilities because they refuse to comply with our requests and demands. It is not immature to admit our needs; rather, it is not very wise, or adult to deny our needs! If we keep our needs and feelings out of our awareness, they will surely be expressed in ways that are potentially harmful, or at least unhelpful to those in our care. It is important to

learn to acknowledge and address our feelings in order to avoid blaming and punishing kids for not meeting our needs. We can aim to develop our competence so that we can recognize the feelings that arise from having our own needs threatened, and prevent these feelings from interfering with the administration of respectful discipline. We can work to maintain perspective, and not expect children to respond to us as if they were adults. We are in this together, and while we are "equal" in terms of worth and dignity, we are not equal in terms of ability and maturity.

Working with Other People's Children

When we work with children who are not "ours" (foster parents, step-parents), much of the behavior we are called upon to witness and attempt to correct is repugnant to us, and is often an affront to our own values. Language used, even names we are called, would not have been tolerated by the adults in our early lives. Some of the behaviors we now must deal with were never even acknowledged in our families, schools or churches. Our heads remind us that kids learn what they learn from somewhere, and they come by their thoughts and actions honestly (by observing those in their environments!). At the same time, our insides still get outraged when they do what they do, or say what they say! This is important to think about because it colors our interactions and interventions, and often tempts us to want to hurt (punish) rather than help (discipline). Our feelings and repulsion tempt us to believe that kids are doing things deliberately to make us crazy, rather than trying to meet their needs in the only way they know, for now. Or, if they are indeed trying to make us crazy, we become blind with rage or resentment, and then cannot pull ourselves together to figure out why, what need would be met if we got crazy? Our language often conveys the belief that kids do things to us: for instance, we ask "did s/he give you a bad time?" as opposed to "did s/he have a bad time?". How often do we

refer to kids "making our lives miserable", or "not cooperating with us", clouding the fact that for the most part our lives are not an issue for them. They are trying to deal with their own lives. Most often, they act miserably because they are miserable, not because they necessarily want to make us miserable.

Complications in Providing Discipline

The concept of discipline requires a willingness to think through the whole issue of adult responsibility with regard to reinforcing or correcting child behavior and to examine our own heads and hearts and form conclusions we can live with. The actual practice of discipline challenges us in issues such as self-awareness, self-restraint and self-control.

Emotional Issues

The entire disciplinary situation is thus complicated by our own feelings and needs. Our feelings are often based on our own rearing, on our feelings about the way children "should" behave and respond to adults, the way we were taught to respond, the way we were "disciplined". Adults who are now parents or substitute parents for children would do well to review our own catalogue of personal childhood experiences, from which we will naturally draw when dealing with our own or other people's children. Remember how you, the child, labeled and felt about the "interventions" (usually experienced as interferences) adults made in response to your behavior. Many of our parents were at least honest, and openly announced that we were "going to be punished". Now that the roles are reversed, and we are the interveners ("interferers"), we are often tempted to fall back on familiar patterns of intervention, even though we rarely consciously admit to ourselves or others that we are out to punish children. Or, in some cases, punishment seems perfectly acceptable because, after all, we didn't turn out so bad! What often seems to happen, based on a combination of our own childhood experiences, or unmet needs, and

a lack of clarity about the nature of discipline, is that we say "discipline", but we practice "punishment". This may take the form of ignoring, or simply reacting. It is a helpful exercise sometimes to recall some "consequences" we received from others that felt very unfair, and to use this review not to revile those adults from our childhood, but to learn from our experience and to use the learning to inform our own responses to kids.

Compliance Issues

Most adults have strong "compliance issues". We do not take well to having our rules broken, or our structure not followed. We believe that you "get along by going along". At this stage in our life, we have often come to reap benefits from compliance - holding jobs, obtaining an education, staying out of trouble. Many of us have become very removed from our early experience of "hating" having to do what we were told, whether it was coming in when it got dark, going to Grandma's when we wanted to stay home and hang out with our friends, or having to do homework instead of watch t.v. We want our children to think about compliance the way we do now, instead of the way we did then. In addition, we sometimes forget the pain that has occurred for many children who are no longer living in their own homes because they did "go along" with hurtful adults, by keeping family secrets, by protecting abusers, etc.

Contradictions

Sometimes those of us now in a position to be the rule enforcers and limit setters find ourselves in a peculiarly contradictory position. Many of us at one time did not have mainstream social ambitions. Many of us are "out of the norm", working for self-fulfillment rather than money or prestige. Some of us were embarrassingly similar to our kids, or kids we are now dealing with. We sometimes face a strange conflict in values and affection when intervening with the behavior of our children, or children in our care. Off duty, or when we were young, we

follow(ed) our own heads and hearts. We criticized conformity, mainstream norms, etc. Now that we find we are the "adult" with responsibility for kids, we suddenly become the paragons of virtue and rule enforcement, watching for infractions, punishing deviations from our expectations, no matter how energized the reasons from children explaining their behavior. Do we really object to the behavior as strenuously as our affect indicates, or are we often merely responding as we think we should, or as others think we should?

Clarifying Consistency

Consistent does not mean "the same as"! Unfortunately, much creative discipline has been stifled or thwarted due to massive misunderstanding and misapplication of this word. I don't have to be just like you to be consistent. That's being a clone, and it deprives me of my individuality and uniqueness. To be consistent means to "adhere to the same principles" (Webster, 1990). It has to do with "compatibility", not replication. I am consistent with you if I am "not in contradiction with" you. Mom and dad don't necessarily have to say or do the exact same thing to be consistent. We don't have to act exactly like another to be consistent. Whew! What a relief. There is no harm or confusion experienced by children from differences in style; only from differences in substance.

If we agree to discipline, we may not arrive at an identical consequence. We may not say or do the same things in response to a child. What will be true is that we will both adhere to the same principles, the same "bottom lines". This means that neither of us will ignore a child. It also means that neither of us will intentionally hurt a child in order to make a point. A child may hurt as a result of a consequence, and they often, if not usually do. But they will know that their pain is a by-product, not the goal. And they will know that we are both trying to help them do better in the future, which will work out to their benefit, as well as ours.

To be consistent implies that people working with the same child(ren) cannot afford to be isolated from each other in either values or contact. It means they have to talk to each other - both about themselves and the kids. It requires that we work to overcome our human inclinations and that we become willing to call each other on punitive responses. It requires that we support each other rather than criticizing. It asks us to develop our own self-awareness, and perhaps make some changes ourselves. It means that we have to trust each other, and respect each others intentions. If you do something differently than I would have done it, I must trust that you believed the child would learn from the consequence you gave. I don't second guess you or come in and do my own thing which undoes what you decided.

I don't believe that parents who are unwilling to work as a real "team" are able to assure "consistent" discipline. Maybe, sadly, that is why we tolerate so much punishment, and merely roll our eyes back in our head and say nothing. Or why we let ourselves get bullied into giving consequences that really don't make sense or that feel bad to us. We're afraid or unwilling to take each other on, and make a mutual commitment to providing true discipline. Perhaps our unwillingness to work things out with each other is one of the primary reasons for so many children getting punished in so many situations.

Limits and Expectations

The ultimate role of the adult is **not** to "set limits and clarify expectations". That's the easy part of the role. The necessary role of the adult is to teach children to operate within reasonable limits, and to help them learn the necessary skills to meet our expectations. If children could operate within our limits and meet all of our expectations we would just declare them legally free as soon as they could walk. We keep our children because they **need** us. Learning to operate within boundaries does not come naturally. Most/all of our expectations

carry implied social and thinking skills. If you're six and I tell you that I want you to play a piano concerto are you automatically able to do what I've asked? Are you being defiant if you don't play it? Do you have an attitude problem if you ask me if you can do something else? It's interesting how often we forget how long it takes for children to truly grow. Our behavior in response to child behavior often conveys an ambivalence toward them. We are both frustrated over their youth, and fearful of loss of their need for us. This may explain why we demand what can't be given, tell them to "stop acting like a child"; expect one minute that they complete all assigned chores with no complaints and to our complete satisfaction, and then turn around and tell them their "too young" to go where they want to go. In fact, we are not mere custodians of the structure or resources for keeping order and control. We are tutors, guides, messengers. It is not only our responsibility to keep order and control, but to teach kids self-control so that order can be maintained.

When enforcing limits and stating expectations, discipline asks us to explain the reason for the rule, not just to enforce the rule. It demands that we give some background for our expectations: why do we have them? how are they good for the child as well as for us? Discipline asks us to give up some of our pet phrases, such as "because I said so", or "because I'm the adult", and to help children understand **why** things are as they are, not just telling them that "that's the way it is". We give up these simple, efficient phrases because they do not teach.

Thinking vs. Techniques

There are many fine books on the discipline of children. Many of us have been to workshops where excellent suggestions have been made about ways to intervene with behavior that is seen as problematic. No parent or professional can feel competent without a wide array of planful, respectful, effective "techniques", gleaned from any number of sources - our experiences

as children, our experiences with other children, observations of others, "tips" picked up in books, articles, and workshops. At the same time, we want to be leery of employing a technique we saw or learned or used before without careful consideration of its usefulness in **this** particular situation, with this particular child, to reach a particular goal. It is not as important to know what some "expert" would do in a given situation as it is to begin to instinctively evaluate each situation: to become clear with regard to the specific goals of an intervention; to design or implement an interventive technique that will be suitable for the child and the behavior incident; to consider whether an intervention has a chance of producing results that favor the well-being of the individual child, the group/family members, and the adults in charge. This approach will utilize our creativity and ingenuity, will maximize the potential for effective use of proven techniques, and will lead to results that enhance our relationships with the children/youth in our care. It will also increase our own sense of competence, since it is more likely that a carefully "tailored" intervention will produce the desired learning.

Discipline as an Ingredient in the Process of Change

Although learning has intrinsic rewards, giving up familiar and comfortable behaviors, and replacing them with new ones, represents a major change. Children, like most of us, are likely to resist efforts to change. It is important to understand discipline in this context so that we do not become discouraged or disheartened, or tempted to retreat to old ways of intervening when our new approach doesn't yield immediate results. Change, if it is to last, most often occurs gradually, in increments, and will often be barely perceptible. For this reason, we must be committed to the "rightness" of the process and goal of discipline, and thus be willing to persist when the learning is as slow as learning often is. When working with young people who have adapted troubling behavior patterns into their lives for some time, it is helpful to keep in mind

how long the old behaviors have been in place before becoming discouraged about how long we have to work to help them learn new ways to deal with difficult situations.

The attitude of the adult can become a crucial ingredient in the process of change. We have been reminded (Kruger, 1980 and others) that it is important to show children and young people that we believe they **can** change. It can be extremely helpful if children are surrounded by adults who are also working on making helpful changes in their own lives. Keeping our own process in mind can increase "empathy" for children we are asking to change. When we realize how difficult it is to work on changes in our own lives, we can demonstrate to young people that we do understand how hard it is to change, and also that change is indeed possible and desirable.

This "parallel approach" also enhances the mutuality of interactions. We can share with a youngster how much trouble we're having dieting, how slow it is, how discouraged we can become, how no-one even notices I'm getting thinner. Since none of us is perfect (yet), we're probably working on something - controlling our temper or weight, cutting down or stopping our smoking, learning a new skill, etc. Sharing change expectations and experiences fosters much more of an alliance between a helping and caring adult and a child with behavior problems. It sets the stage for life-long learning and improvement.

It is important to note that change is also the desired outcome of punishment. Redl (1980), a pioneer in examining environments constructed to produce change in disturbed children, stated that "the use of punishment implies an attempt to produce an experience for the child which is unpleasant - based on the assumption that sometimes the affliction of an unpleasant experience may mobilize something in a child which, without such a boost from without, would not have occurred". The issue, then, becomes the adults' commitment to the **means** of prompting change. Punishment has been shown to produce change, but it is usually

short-term, and limited to situations where "enforcers" are present to provide continued externally oriented motivation. We know from both our juvenile and adult correction systems that punishing alone does not usually produce changes in behavior, it only causes them to cease temporarily. Those systems that incorporate training and learning demonstrate much greater success with "offenders". Discipline implies the kind of learning that will be internalized, and that will produce change motivated from within, and thus less dependent on external reinforcement. Both punishment and discipline will usually be experienced as "unpleasant" by the child. What will be different is the motive of the adult structuring the consequence, which we have to trust will be understood by the child in the midst of their unhappiness.

DISCIPLINE IN ACTION: SOME REQUIREMENTS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Discipline takes more time, and requires more work than punishment.

Discipline is not for the lazy, disinterested, or cynical. Discipline requires that we do a lot of thinking before and during the intervention. A teaching framework asks that we design, not merely administer, an intervention that will teach the young person something about the situation, and/or about him/herself, and that it will help the individual to handle the situation better next time. We must consider not only **what** the child did, which is the focus of punishment, but **who** the child is, and **why** they did what they did, in light of his/her history and personal make-up. Discipline asks us to try to understand the motive from the child's point of view: why s/he tried to meet his/her need(s) in the unacceptable way s/he did, and how we can provide an intervention and consequence that will facilitate effective learning. Discipline as a practice concept is often avoided in favor of more punitive interventions simply because of the

demands made of the adults' time and energy. It's easy to have charts on the wall, spelling out consequences for all manner of infractions. We don't have to take the time to be creative if we have "habitual" consequences (such as time out, going to your room, restriction, etc.). To really implement discipline, we have to take the time to evaluate each incident of unacceptable behavior to understand the reason (motive) for the behavior and the choice of a particular form of behavior (past learning), so that we can devise a consequence geared for the needs of the individual child.

Discipline requires a focus on the individual.

Similar behavior does not spring, necessarily, from similar motivations. When a group of children do something together, in considering what consequences to administer, each child must be considered in terms of his/her background, present coping skills, learning needs, and abilities for learning. Five children may run away or cut school, for example, but each will run for his/her own reasons. One child may run because of poor impulse control, another because s/he cannot say "no" when prompted by others to do something, another because of some fantasy about what will happen if they leave, another may have learned that it is safer to leave some situations than to stay, another may be frustrated by a learning disability etc. Discipline, therefore, will not allow each of the children to receive the same consequence, since each child may need to learn something different. Further, each child has a different capacity to learn, and may have different styles of learning. From a disciplinary point of view, each young person deserves the respect to be seen and treated as a unique person with unique needs and unique abilities and styles with regard to how they learn. None of this effort is interesting to those who resort to punishment or uniform consequences.

Discipline cannot be forced

Punishment can be forced, but we cannot force anyone to learn. This fact frustrates some adults who have needs to feel in control, especially of children. Recognizing that a child can be made to hurt, but cannot be made to learn, challenges us to structure a learning situation that we think and hope will be effective, but which we recognize may have to be adjusted or changed if it becomes apparent that learning is not occurring. It is also true that since learning can't be forced, the child may show us that it's going to take some time for the learning to take hold, which frustrates those who seek immediate results. Adults who feel good about themselves only when they feel they can "control" others (even children!) will also be primarily frustrated by, and disinterested in, discipline concepts.

Discipline enhances a child's self-image.

Punishment damages a sense of self-worth. How valuable can you be if you deserve to be hurt because you didn't please someone. Many children act as they do even though the consequence is that they fall out of favor with important adults they truly care about. Many children act as they do because they simply have not lived long enough to "learn" the results of certain kinds of behavior. Things make sense to undeveloped minds that more mature people think about quite differently. For children who have not been properly parented in the past, "acting up" may be all they know. It feels comfortable. Certain responses make them feel like themselves, often enhancing their negative self-images. I have never seen any evidence that it makes them feel "good" inside, only comfortable. Learning that "you'd better not do this or this will happen" is not the kind of learning that enhances self-worth. It teaches that there is a consequence, but it doesn't teach how to do things differently or better. Learning new ways to behave and handle emotions and difficult situations, learning more about themselves, learning

that someone cares enough about them to struggle with them to help them change, learning that they can, indeed, do things differently and more effectively - this, I believe, feels good!

Discipline allows the development of personal competence, and the sustaining of positive relationships with important adults, building, ultimately, a sense of worth and value.

Discipline is often hampered by previous life experiences.

Many children who present behavior problems have never been "disciplined". They've been punished, or they've been ignored. Neither punishment or lack of involvement teaches responsible behavior. Previous experience with negative responses from adults makes it difficult to accept discipline, which implies a different motive from the adult, and often confuses or makes children suspicious. It's hard for some children/youth to believe that I'm doing what I'm doing because I really want them to learn how to handle things better, not because I'm angry and want them to suffer as a result. Many children will tempt us to do what would be easier for us **and** for them - to ignore them ("leave me alone, I'm not talking to you, get out of my face" etc.) or to punish them ("go ahead take everything, why don't you just hit me"). It is a challenge not to respond in the ways they solicit that would make them feel comfortable. We know that abused kids elicit abuse. Kids also solicit treatment from others that confirms their view of the world or of themselves. Many kids don't believe they are **worth** discipline! Many kids really don't understand our willingness to invest the time and effort required by discipline. These things are hard to keep in mind when kids get up in our face and behave in ways that tempt us to punish them; when it feels like they're ruining our days or undermining our authority.

Discipline is hard just because we're human.

Sometimes we have bad days. Sometimes we're tired. Sometimes we resent what we

feel we "should" do for our kids, when no-one cares or cared about us that way. These times call on all of our reserves, and all of our personal and/or professional commitment. We have to remind ourselves of the "ethics", the rightness, of discipline. We have to preach to ourselves, or to each other, to remember that adults have certain moral obligations and responsibilities for children; that children deserve to be treated with kindness and respect, even when they've infuriated us. They are, after all, children. They're in process; they're not cooked yet. How they turn out will have a lot to do with us. Sometimes we just plain don't want this responsibility.

Discipline, like love, requires patience and kindness.

Punishment can be swift and impulsive. Who hasn't, in a flash of anger and frustration, been tempted to take away someone's bathroom privileges, to ground them for a year, to send them to their room until they "grow up"? The commitment to provide discipline in these moments is much like the commitment to love the unlovable. It takes will. It takes patience to explain and relate a consequence, to construct a consequence that changes, rather than confirms, a negative view of the world, and then to wait for them to learn.

Discipline can be proactive as well as reactive.

This, to my mind, is one of the greatest "gifts" of a disciplinary framework for interventions with negative behavior. We can't punish until something has happened. But we can always teach. We can teach **before** something happens; we can teach the minute it looks like something is going to happen. The truth is that very often corrective discipline is necessary because we didn't provide preventive discipline. Selfishly, it is far more useful, less exhausting, and more pleasant to spend time with youngsters to **prevent** misbehavior, than to anxiously await the occurrence of negative behavior and then having to react to it when everyone (young person and adult) involved is in an emotional state that decreases the chances of effective

teaching and learning taking place. Sometimes we just seem to wait for something awful or annoying to happen, and then spend countless hours in "meetings" (moms and dads, teachers and counselors, adults and kids), consultations and ruminations deciding what to do in response. In fact, we can talk **in advance** about how to keep windows from being broken when a child becomes angry or frustrated, how to solve a conflict without a fight, about how we can handle a child's impulse to run out of a classroom or counseling session, or away from a group of playmates when things get frustrating. We can plan in advance how to direct aggression into acceptable outlets. We can learn to pick up on the warning signs, the "vibes" that signal the potential for a situation to get out of hand. We can prompt and teach alternate behavior **before** a child makes an unfortunate choice. Why wait!

Discipline Assigns Responsibility More Appropriately

The very term "behavior management" is interesting, in that it conveys a clear, or at least implied, message that it is adults who are responsible to manage the behavior of children. I think, in fact, that the constant use of this term - continually seen in conference brochures and literature pertaining to work with young people - confuses the issues, creates hostility, and increases stress, especially with regard to those youngsters who are often referred to as "difficult". It causes us to feel good when we feel in control, and to feel bad when **a child** is out of control. It seems more helpful to correct both our thinking and our vocabulary to the use of the term "behavior intervention" to describe the adult role. It is, in the end (our goal), the child/youth's responsibility to manage his or her own behavior. It is my experience that the more responsible an adult feels for the way a child behaves, the more likely s/he is to be tempted to intervene in a punishing way. Just a thought.

Closing Thoughts

Discipline is one of the primary tasks for adults with responsibility for children and young people. It is also one of our greatest challenges. It can be, when done as a way of life with those in our care, one of our greatest rewards.

There are many difficult tasks to be accomplished before we are ready to consider becoming a real disciplinarian. The tasks are ours, not the kids. The work needed is difficult, but not unpleasant. Discipline is always more positive than punishment. It feels better not only to the child, but to us. The mutuality gives a child/adolescent an ally in his/her struggle to feel better and act better. It puts us on the kids side, rather than against them. Learning feels good. Having someone take the time to teach you something helps you feel cared about and important. Being taught implies that you can learn; that you are or can learn to be competent. Being able to teach feels good too. It's also easier on us than any amount of punishing, and, it works and therefore it feels terrific.

My experience in meeting literally thousands of folks each year is that workers in punitive environments, and parents with punitive approaches, are much "grouchier" than those more oriented toward discipline. These folks, as a group, tend to be more cynical, have high stress, and tend not to feel very good about themselves or their job as parent or caretaker. A discipline approach is not only best for kids, but a key ingredient in adult morale. Watching young people change their feelings about themselves, seeing children/youth recognizing their own value and worth, is a thrill that never leaves a worker or parent who has toiled with and on behalf of valued young people. Recognizing that disciplinary interactions - teaching kids that they deserve our time, our thought, our planning, our creativity; teaching them that love and respect can be found in this world as evidenced by the love and respect we can share with them;

teaching them that they can learn to meet their needs in a way that enhances their own feelings about themselves, and respects the feelings of others around them; sharing the joy and confidence that comes from learning - these rewards will energize us and give us the motivational push to keep on another hour, another day, another year.

Responsible adults tow a difficult line, searching for a blend of structure and freedom, limits and permission, that allows children/young people the right to learn from their own mistakes, but that still lends them the protection of our experience and strength as a buffer against unnecessary disasters. There will be times when the consequences we mete out will seem unreasonable to the child. At times like this, we want to examine ourselves to make sure that they are, indeed, reasonable and necessary, even if not understood. Anyone who has witnessed a two-year-old running out into the street, convinced that all cars will stop while s/he retrieves the ball, has experienced a moment when preventive discipline was the order of the day, whether the process was able to be mutual or not. There are other dangerous situations that call upon our best skills in attempting to provide preventive discipline: most of us are not willing to allow teenagers to learn from the mistake of cutting their wrists, or taking a dangerous drug, any more than we would let them learn a lesson by ignoring the symptoms of appendicitis. It requires careful thought, and lots of discussion, between adults to determine which situations we should step into, and which we should allow to play out so that learning can occur from natural consequences. We must remind ourselves that children think like children, not like small adults. We also must recognize that there are times when kids are not available for discipline - when they're high on drugs or drunk from alcohol, when they are blinded by rage, or when they are out of touch with reality. Most often, these times will pass and the opportunity for discipline (as contrasted with crisis control) will present itself. We will then buy up these moments after the

storm, to try to teach another way of handling stress or peer pressure, remembering that the ultimate goal of all discipline is **self-control, self-discipline**.

Frankly, it's our choice. We can teach, or we can taunt. To taunt is to "reproach in an insulting manner; to mock; to provoke; to scorn". To intervene with behavior in a hurtful way, and then to make believe it's for a child's own good, does just that. If we're in a state where we don't really care about whether the child really learns anything or not, fine - but admit it. When we're going to punish because it feels good to us, do it, but call it what it is. It's insulting to be lied to. And I think kids know the truth anyway. If, however, we decide to try the high road, to lend our knowledge and experience to one who hasn't had it, but needs it, then let's get more interested in helping than hurting. Even though it's harder and more tedious. Even if it requires us to be better than we feel like being. Even if it means that we have to work out our issues with other adults. Do kids deserve it?

It is when we see a child or teenager learn a better way to handle his/her feelings and impulses that we get our true rewards for having chosen to become intimately involved with God's greatest gift to the world - children.

Other articles written by Lorraine can be obtained at her website: LorraineFox.com

"THE CORRECTIONS OF DISCIPLINE
ARE THE WAY TO LIFE"

Proverbs 6:23

