

From Punishment to Discipline to Guidance.

By Robin Booth

Published: Biophile February Issue 2007

What do you do if your child asks you, "Which picture do you like best, mine or my brother's?"

And how do you respond when you ask your child to clean their room and when you stick your head in to take a look you find s/he is still playing with their toys. Now what? You look in your child's bag and find another toy that you know is not your child's? It's time for the TV to be turned off and your child throws a tantrum as you turn it off, what do you do?

As a parent you may have similar thoughts: how I can implement effective discipline? I don't want to shout or manipulate. I want my child and I to have a healthy relationship where we respect each other. And how can I support my child to be a dynamic, creative individual?

We live in a societal environment that depends on effective communication for the survival and growth of relationships. The tools of communication are used to convey our intentions and to further our understanding of each other and the world we live in. The desire to communicate is innate but the skills to

do so require a process of life-long learning.

There are many times when we again realise the major effect words have on our children when we communicate with them. Many specialists in relationship dynamics will confirm that *"it's not what you say, but what is understood when you say it."* Perhaps you can relate to some part of this. Perhaps you have realised that how we talk, tells your child how we feel about him /her. Our statements affect their self-esteem and self worth. To a large extent, our language determines their destiny.



For many years educators, psychologists and parents have recognised the harmful effects of 'punishment' on children. For the purpose of this article punishment is defined as 'the giving of something negative (like a smack, or a time out chair) or the taking away of something the child values (no icecream for you tonight, or, you are grounded for three nights). Punishment often makes children feel like failures and more than likely it nurtures angry feelings towards the other. More importantly though, through punishment children lose their trust in adults. Over time these young people come to accept doing negative things and being punished for them as a natural part of life.

By contrast, the increasing use of conflict management (teaching children to solve their problems with words) fosters children's faith in the social process. Conflict management and other guidance methods are being used more now because they work better than punishment. These methods teach children how to solve problems without violence and help children to feel good about themselves. The guidance approach is positive support rather than imposing negativities, with us as the parents having faith in the young child's ability to learn.

Guidance moves away from concepts of discipline and punishment because

it works to create a nurturing environment of respect at all times. It relies on guidelines and positive statements that remind children of the behaviour we are aspiring towards rather than rules which are usually stated in the negative, as though the adult already expects the children to break them. When they intervene, parents direct their responses to the child's *behaviour* and respect the *personality* of the child. They avoid embarrassment, which tends to leave lasting scars. They make sure that their responses are friendly as well as firm. So instead of saying 'Don't run inside!' we can state what it is we want "We *walk* when we are inside. If you wish to run then please go *outside*."

When they intervene, parents direct their responses to the child's *behaviour* and respect the *personality* of the child.



Parents and teachers need to join forces and form working partnerships. Both need to know the difference between words that demoralise and those that give courage; between the words that trigger confrontation and those that invite co-operation; between the words that make it impossible for the child to think or concentrate and the words that free the natural desire to learn. How can we convey to our children that most of our actions and words are motivated by a desire to further their development, that we are trying to do what is best for them? How can we nurture respect, confidence, creativity and integrity in our children and in the people around us?

There are no direct answers as no child and no situation are the same. At the same time though, there are certain skills that help provide the space for our true intentions to be understood and for us to convey our motivation to further develop our relationships with the people around us.

A good starting point in determining whether or not you feel your responses to your child's behaviour is leaning more to guidance or punishment is to ask whether your response (verbal or physical) 'adds to or takes away from the dignity of the child? Is this going to empower them or disempower them? Will this move them towards a behaviour that is positive or will it keep them stuck in the past? Will they value this as a positive learning experience or will this undermine them?

Guidance teaches children the life skills they need as citizens of a democracy; respecting others and oneself, working together in groups, solving problems using words, expressing strong emotions in acceptable ways, making decisions ethically and intelligently. Parents who use guidance realise that it takes into adulthood to master these skills and that in learning them, children - like all of us - make mistakes. Therefore, because children are just beginning this personal development, parents regard behaviours traditionally considered *misbehaviours* as *mistaken* behaviours. The interventions parents make to address mistaken behaviours are firm but friendly, instructive and solution oriented but not punitive. The parent helps children learn from their

mistakes rather than punishing them for the mistakes they make, empowers children to solve problems rather than punishing them for having problems they cannot solve; helps children accept consequences but consequences that leave dignity and self-esteem intact.

Guidance teaching is character education in its truest sense. It starts from a belief in the positive potential of children and is expressed through a dynamic process of interaction. For this reason, parents who use guidance think beyond conventional parenting discipline – the intent of which is more to keep children (literally and figuratively) in line. Rather than simply being a reaction to a crisis, guidance involves team work and participation from the children.

“Our future depends on our ability to provide children with opportunities to become ‘different individuals’- individuals who know how to listen, who acknowledge and respect diverse points of view, who work with others to solve problems, and who can interpret and understand the world in increasingly complex ways.



We have the right to be who we really are, and we help make one another who we are by how we treat one another.”

In closing, here is a story of a pre-school classroom where the teacher uses a strategy of guidance in supporting the children in grappling with their problem.

The social skill of taking turns is one that takes time, patience and many long faces to develop. On this day, we had our play-dough table nestled up against the wall and only two seats for the children to sit at. After about ½ an hour, some children came up to me complaining that they wanted a turn at the table. I asked them if they had spoken to the other two at the table and they said that they had. I wondered how we would

resolve this one and if we would have a lengthy discussion on taking turns again. I chose to describe the problem to the children and support them in coming to an agreeable result.

“Okay guys, we have two children playing dough and another two who would like to play yet we only have two seats. What shall we do?” Both parties voiced that they each wanted to play. We were heading towards a system of time allocation when another child (5yrs old) who was standing nearby piped up and said. “I have a good idea. Why don’t they move the table away from the wall and

put another two chairs on the other side, then all four children can sit at the table?” My mouth hung open for a while as I realised I had not even thought of this myself. I said, “That sounds like a good idea. What do you all think?” The children agreed and they organised themselves. As I was walking away from the table I mentioned to the idea-giver, “Ashwyn, that was a good idea. You thought a lot about how they could solve their problem. Now they can all play together.” He responded, “I know, I have lots of good ideas. And I have lots more at home.”

Parents and teachers need to join forces and form working partnerships.



Robin Booth is the current principal of Synergy Schooling in Cape Town and often runs workshops for the public around the Nurturing of Children’s Self Esteem. www.synergyschooling.co.za