

MSU Extension Publication Archive

Archive copy of publication, do not use for current recommendations. Up-to-date information about many topics can be obtained from your local Extension office.

Dear Parents of Young Children – Setting the Stage for Discipline?

Michigan State University Extension Service

L.K. Backus, Extension Family Life

Issued March 1983

2 pages

The PDF file was provided courtesy of the Michigan State University Library

Scroll down to view the publication.

Dear Parents of young children



Setting The Stage For Discipline

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

FREQUENTLY WE HEAR that modern authorities are saying it is all right for children to do almost anything, even to swinging on the chandeliers. Now I do not know of any reliable authority on the discipline of children who is recommending such practices. But there are many views as to what discipline really is. In too many cases, it seems to me, discipline is thought of as an "either-or" proposition; either children "rule the roost" or they "mind" at the "drop of the hat."

What Is Discipline?

To me it means teaching the child that there are certain rules in life that people live by and expecting that the child will eventually adopt these rules of his own accord. This is working towards self-discipline, a goal that I believe should be kept in mind in the daily handling of little children.

Most parents are interested in better methods of disciplining children. There is always the question of whether now is the time to overlook or now is the time to do something. But over and above this is the important consideration of how you feel about what you do.

If you approach a behavior situation feeling cross, angry, and upset, your child will probably react in the same way. We can be firm without being angry. This will produce a quite different effect on the child.

It seems to me, then, in disciplining little children much depends on how we as parents approach the problem. We might think of this as setting the stage for discipline. How can we set the stage? What are some things to keep in mind?

Suggest in a Positive Way

"Bounce the ball on the floor" is the positive way. It tells a child what to do. "Don't hit the window" is the negative way. It only tells him what not to do.

"Carry the glass of milk slowly" is better than, "Don't spill the milk."

When little children have to be stopped in what they are doing, it is altogether too easy to let the words "Stop," and "Don't" slip out. For this reason it takes effort to think of words that can be used in place of the negative. Why not write down the positive statements you use in a day? If you find you are using many negative ones see how you might re-state them.

Using positive statements stirs up less resistance in little children. It also creates a better feeling inside the parent. If we are concentrating more on what the child should be doing we will probably become more understanding. We will also be less annoyed if we do not dwell on the "Don'ts."

Save the words "Don't" and "Stop" for those emergencies when it is necessary to put a quick stop to what

the child is doing. It seems quite useless to try to use "nice positive" statements if the child is in danger or if the house is about to become a shambles.

Let Your Tone of Voice Do Part of the Job

Where is the parent who has not at some time shouted at children? We seem to think that the louder we talk the more certain we are that they will do as they are told. This is not to say that parents do not have plenty of cause for shouting at times, and in so doing it may even be some release to the parent. But as a regular technique in disciplining children it is not effective.

Check yourself as to the tone of voice that your children are most apt to listen to. Is it when you speak loud and fast, or is it when you slow down and speak in a quiet, pleasant voice? A pleasing tone of voice is well worth working on for the sake of those around you. Continually speaking in a loud tone of voice will probably mean that your child will have to raise his voice to match yours.

It is better not to shout at little children from one corner of the house to another. Rather, move nearer and speak directly to them—you will be more apt to gain their attention.

Also, speaking quietly not only calms the child but keeps your own feelings in a more manageable state.

Choose Words That Will Build Confidence

How do you stop a child who is misbehaving? Isn't it necessary to show him that you disapprove? Yes,



but there is more than one way to convey this idea. You may feel like saying, "You naughty girl!" or "You bad, bad boy." Such words tend to belittle a child. They may cause him to have guilt feelings or to lose confidence in himself. It is better to show



your disapproval of what the child is doing rather than of the child himself. To say, "Jimmy, keep your food on your plate," helps Jimmy more than "You naughty child—to make mother all that work."

Such words as "Mother won't love you," threaten the child with the loss of your love and may be just more than he can bear. Contrary to what it may seem at times, children prefer to feel that they are doing what parents expect of them and they certainly behave better when they feel they have your love and approval.

If we can use words that will seem to say to the child—I don't like what you did but I still like you, and this is the way you can do better the next time—we will be on the right track.

Keep Your Suggestions And Directions at a Minimum

In a previous letter, we mentioned the tendency of little children to talk a lot. We said too that little children need to be talked to but we need not fall into the habit of responding to everything they say. We can talk so much of the time that they become accustomed to our talking and tend to ignore it. In such a case parents may say—"they hear us only when they want to hear us." But if we expect them to listen to a steady hum of conversation we are expecting too much. Furthermore, little children in their play tend to concentrate so completely on what they are doing that they actually may not be paying any attention at all to what we are saying.

If we respond to everything that little children say they may come to demand too much of parents. Children can learn gradually that there are times when mother has to give her complete attention to meal-planning or to a caller, or she may want a few moments just to sit and think. Some

moderation in talking will help children to respect such times.

Sometimes we can make so many suggestions to children that it really prevents them from using their own ideas. Making a suggestion before a child needs help deprives him of the chance to work out his own problem and may really upset his play. He may need help but at the right time and in the right amount.

Occasionally we may have to back up our words with action. Telling Jimmy that it is time to wash his hands may bring no response. In this case it might be helpful to take Jimmy's hand and lead him to the bathroom.

Re-Direct Undesirable Behavior

Two-year-old Timmy, who is mauling the kitten, objects violently when the kitten is taken from him. Substituting a toy kitten may satisfy Timmy's desire to handle and play with the kitten.

Timmy and Linda are beginning to throw toys in the living room. Do they

need to be punished? Perhaps what they need most at the moment is to don their wraps and play vigorously out-of-doors.

Discipline problems can sometimes be avoided if a desirable activity is substituted for the undesirable. What you choose to substitute must meet the needs of the child at the moment. Substituting a story book for a child who is tired of sitting will not help; neither will it help to suggest running out-of-doors for a child who is already physically tired.

This letter suggests that:

Important in the discipline of little children is setting the stage so that many discipline problems will not arise.

Louise H. Rackus

Extension Specialist in
Family Life

Uses for mesh bags that come filled with oranges, apples, and potatoes:

• Use them to store blocks, to separate different kinds of toys, to keep small pieces from becoming lost.

• Make a punching bag by letting the child tear and wad pieces of newspaper into balls about the size of an orange. Stuff the balls in the bag, draw the string, and knot it. The child can throw it, kick it, jump on it, or sit on it.

Are you "scrap-conscious"? If you keep a basket of odds and ends such as, buttons, pieces of string, colored yarns, colored foil, beads, cloth, ribbon, lace, leather, felt, etc., children enjoy pasting these bits on colored mounting paper, making their own arrangements.

MSU is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution

Cooperative Extension Service Programs are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, or sex. Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gordon E. Goyer, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824.

SP-3M-3-83-DG-UP, Price 10 cents. Single copy free to Michigan residents.