



GUIDANCE INSTEAD OF DISCIPLINE: THOUGHTS FOR PARENTS

By P. Donohue Shortridge

Even at the youngest age, your child wants to do what is expected, because she loves you and wants to be just like you. She also has a powerful inner drive to adapt to the world around her, including the world of your home, and to do so she needs to know what the rules for life are. She looks to you, her parent, to show her.

You may find that the more guidance you offer a child, the less often you will have to discipline. To start, ask yourself, *What do I want to model for my child and show her how to do, so that she can become a cooperative, competent, and contributing member of our family?*

First of all, be the model for the expected behavior. If you do not want your child to leave the dinner table in the middle of the meal, then you should not leave the table to check your phone. If you do not want your child to yell, then don't yell yourself.

Second, show your child what is expected; show him how to do it. Let's say you want to give him the task of sweeping the floor. By the way, your child already does this at his Montessori school, so it's not unfamiliar. But while he may have seen and used a broom and dustpan at school, you should still demonstrate the task at home. Where the broom is stored will be specific to your home, as will the location of the trash can and how it operates. (Can the child hold the dustpan and open the trash can

Completing a task
with the right-size
tools



with his foot, or should he put the dustpan down, open the trash can, then pick up the dustpan, etc.?)

To initiate your demonstration, first give your child tools that fit his hand and height. Name the tools as you use them: “This chore is called sweeping the floor; watch me. I’m sweeping the floor with the broom, then moving what I swept up into the dustpan, and now I’m throwing it away in the trash. Now, it’s your turn.” Do the task together for the first few times, so that you know that he understands the procedure. Also, remember that every activity has a beginning, middle, and end. Show him where and how to get the broom and dustpan, how to use it, and how to put it away.

By showing your child how to do something, you have created an opportunity to enhance the parent/child relationship. You are taking the time to show him something, and by doing so, you signal to him that he is competent and a full member of the family. Your child feels seen.

Once your child gets the hang of a task and is doing it as a matter of course, offer feedback and support rather than praise. Praise carries with it judgment about what you think. “I’m so proud of you that you swept the floor.” Or “good job.” Or “thank you for sweeping the floor.” These praise statements lend themselves to an external locus of control—what you think about what

your child did, rather than what your child thinks about what he did. Instead of praise, say what you saw and what it means. This allows your child to form his own impressions and judgments of what he did, fostering an internal locus of control. Offer comments in a positive but not cheerleading tone of voice: “You swept the floor; all the crumbs are gone. It’s all clean.”

Now what if your child “forgets”; chooses not to do the task; or whines, cries, or stalls? These are issues that many parents face, and I empathize with them. Before you do or say anything, stay calm and think. Ask yourself, *Does my child know what is expected and how to accomplish it?* If yes, then be clear, quick, decisive and most of all, respectful. For example, “When you go back and sweep the floor, then you may join us in here for a board game.” Period. Do not repeat yourself or beg or yell. Give her time to comply, but do not give in. What you want to offer is a consistent response that allows your child to take responsibility for her behavior. Remember, your child’s behavior is her problem, not yours.

If your child is having trouble doing what she knows is expected of her, she may be having a hard time with transitions. You may have experienced this at school pickup time. Your child has held it together all day, and then, seeing you, falls apart. One way to address this is

to keep things simple: Have a routine you follow every time, and talk about expectations ahead of time. Let's say you expect your child to sweep the floor after dinner is over (and that you have shown her how to do it and made suitable tools available). During dinner, while everyone is still at the table, talk about what comes next. "We're almost finished with dinner, and after dinner, we all have chores to do. Let's get to it so we can have time for story. Dad will bring the dishes over to the sink, Mom will load the dishwasher, and you will sweep the floor." Or if you are in the car on the way home, and the expectation is that your child will hang up her coat and backpack when she gets in the house (on hooks she can reach), address this as you are getting out of the car: "When you put your things away, then you may play" (or "then we can have a snack" or "then we can read a story," or whatever comes next in your house). Using this "When you... then you..." strategy, rather than simply saying, "Please hang up your coat," gives your child the opportunity for development of the will, figuring out what comes next rather than being told what to do. Or, when you come in the door with your child, you can say out loud what you are doing to model for your child: "I'm hanging up my coat." This is often a great clue, for the child to see parents doing what they expect the child to do.

But if your child comes into the house, plops her stuff down on the floor, and proceeds to the next activity, you can simply get into her space, and with brief eye contact and no anger in your voice, say, "What do you do when you first come in the house before you go play?" or "What is the rule in our house when we first come home?" Do not allow her to proceed to the next activity till this task is accomplished. (Again, all this assumes she has been shown and told what the task is in the first place. We cannot ask the child to comply with that which they don't know is expected. But once they do know, hold them accountable.)

Another reason children sometimes whine or stall is that they need more precious one-on-one time with their parents and are attempting to get it any way they can—by saying "I can't do it," offering an excuse like "I have a boo-boo," or having a dramatic meltdown. To avoid this, be sure you spend enough time together, just being together.

Finally, there is the issue of screen time. It is really challenging for a parent to get compliance for expected behavior if the child is glued to a screen and the parent is essentially pulling the child away from the mesmerizing device.

What about rewards for good behavior and punishments for bad behavior? Rewards don't really work in the long run, especially if your goal is to foster your child's growing ability to practice self-discipline and

gain control over himself. If you offer "good behavior" rewards, such as stickers, candy, and other irrelevant incentives, your child learns to comply only when there is something in it for him outside of the inherent tasks/behavior at hand. And if at this age the reward is candy, what will you give your child when he is 10, 15, or 18 years old? What you create when you give rewards is an external locus of control; that is, you are the reward giver, the arbiter of your child's behavior, and thus you deprive him the chance to develop an internal locus of control that he will need to become a successful person.

When you punish your child (especially corporal punishment), he learns that a person who has power can force another person to surrender. Children learn this lesson and can take it out on other children through bullying. As a parent, it is challenging for you to remain calm and detached while punishing your child. You are mad, and your child hears your tone and feels your anger. But can he learn the lesson you think you are teaching? Over time, punishments can have a corrosive effect on your relationship with your child. Not to mention, as with rewards, the punishments will have to escalate over time. What worked as punishment when your child was 5 will no longer work in adolescence.

Rewards and punishments are short-term solutions. If your goal is just to make the behavior stop, it may work for the moment; you've either bribed or terrorized your

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child to comply. But what you have really set up is a vicious cycle that only grows over time. Keep in mind that your goal is guidance of your child's self-creation.

To further this guidance, remember the keys: Model the appropriate behavior, show your child how to do a task, be calm and respectful if your child needs redirecting, and hold him or her accountable.

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