

Discipline: What Works and Why

by James B. Stenson



Here are some basic ideas about the parents' role of moral leadership in the family, often referred to as "discipline."--

1.) Let's start with an absolutely basic principle: your rights of authority in the family.

Effective parent leaders understand that parenthood is not an elective office; you do not have to curry favor with your children. Your rights as a parent come with the job, with your responsibility.

In the home as in business, authority and responsibility--rights and duties--must go hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other. The two have to be proportional, of equal heft. If you were handed a tough assignment at work but were denied the power and resources to carry it out, you'd be stymied with the burden of your duties, and you'd seethe with resentment at this injustice. Nobody--in any human situation--can bear responsibility without the power to carry it out.

As a parent, you take on enormous responsibility. You are responsible for your children's welfare, and for this you answer to the law, to society, to your conscience, to your Creator. In fact--and this is something parents seldom think about--you will even answer later to your grown children; someday they will look back and judge you, up or down, for the way you dealt with them in childhood.

So when a man and woman become parents, they take on rights as well. They confidently claim the authority--the power to choose and decide--that they must possess to lead their children responsibly, to keep them from harm.

Authority means, among other things, the right to be obeyed. Smart parents may harbor quiet doubts about many things in family life, but they never doubt their right to their children's obedience. They assert this right, as they assert all their other rights, in a clear, no-nonsense way. But they do this with understanding and affection: they're "affectionately assertive," and this is the essence of parental leadership.

2.) The word "discipline" has had a bad press. It's widely misunderstood to mean punishment. But it does not mean punishment. Nor does it mean control for its own sake. And it does not mean enforcing rules just for the sake of minimizing hassles at home, a kind of "damage control."

Discipline certainly involves occasional punishment and some control as well as clear guidelines for behavior. But its real meaning is far deeper and more important. Discipline really

means confident, effective leadership.

Look at it this way. The word "discipline" is related to the word "disciple," and it springs from the Latin word meaning "to learn." Discipline is what happens when some leader teaches and his "disciples" learn. Broadly speaking, discipline means teaching and learning, leading and joining.

To repeat the key idea here, discipline in family life means teaching the children to acquire--by personal example, directed practice, and verbal explanation (in that order)-- the great virtues of sound judgment, a sense of responsibility, personal courage, self-control, and magnanimity. These take root in the give and take of family life and then flower to healthy maturity through the steady nourishment of confident, unified parental leadership. All this takes years.

So, discipline (teaching) requires planning and patience as much as occasional swift corrective action. It calls for example-giving as much as rules, and encouragement and praise as much as loving denial and just punishment.

It means living in the family such that children are made to do what is right--as the parents see this--and shun what is wrong, and to explain the differences so compellingly that the children will remember the lessons all their lives and then pass them on to their children. That's the long and the short of it.

3.) All the effective parents I've known practice what might be called *affectionate assertiveness*. That is, they *assert* correct conduct and attitudes by their example, action, and words. At the same time they're unfailingly affectionate with their children. They correct their children because they love them, want to protect them, and care above all else for their future welfare and happiness.

They set out to *correct the fault, not the person*. They "hate the sin, love the sinner." They're willing, on occasion, to risk being temporarily "unpopular" with a wayward son or daughter--knowing that their future happiness is at stake and that their children will someday thank them and revere them as great parents.

How do you show affection to your children?

You physically touch them. You welcome them on your knee and embrace them. You take their hand while walking together. You playfully squeeze them on the shoulder or arm. When walking by them as they're sitting someplace, you pat them on the head or ruffle their hair a bit. You invite them to sit next to you and pat them when they sit down. You give them a wink and a smile. You tell corny jokes and laugh at theirs. You tell funny stories and find other ways to share a good laugh, but without offending anyone. You whisper things in their ears. (Sometimes, when you feel like shouting something at your small children, have them sit on your lap instead and whisper it into their ear; this never fails to get their attention. And

your correction comes across affectionately, as it should.)

You show happiness and pride in their accomplishments. *You make praise every bit as specific as blame.* (Parents tend to make blame specific but to put praise in vague generalities: "You've been a good girl this morning....") Praise them for a job well done, even when they've done it as punishment: "You did a great job making your bed this morning.... Your room is spic and span, just the way it should be.... Your homework looks neat and professional, and I'm proud of you...." Children need sincere praise from time to time. In fact, we all do. One of people's greatest needs, at any age, is sincere appreciation.

When you tuck them into bed, you linger a bit, just a couple of minutes to make small talk. Bedtime is a great occasion to talk things over with children, and listen to them. All their lives, they will fondly remember their bedtime chats with Mom and Dad.

Most of all, with both sons and daughters, you show affection with your eyes. You should *listen to your children with your eyes.* When you deliberately make eye-contact with them, especially when they're speaking to you, you show how much you care for them. In your eyes they can read your soul--your love for them, your pride in them, your hopes for their future.

Somehow, mysteriously, normal children sense when their parents correct them out of love. Great parents correct *because* they love. Even though kids dislike the correction itself, deep down they grasp the love behind their parents' direction. Sooner or later as they grow up, they understand that their parents' occasional wrath is aimed at their faults, not them personally.

Since you, as a parent, show plenty of affection in normal, non-confrontational situations in family life (which is most of the time), and because you always show willingness to forgive once apologies are made and punishment completed, your children sense the truth--that your whole life, including episodes of corrective punishment, devotes itself to their happiness. Later, as young adults, and even before they're out of their teens, they will fully understand why your love moved you to act as you did, and they will thank you.

4.) So, these things being said, what can you do to punish misbehavior in fairly serious matters? Here is a list drawn from parents' experience:

- Physically, but painlessly, restrain the children. Take them by the hand or arm and remove them to someplace private. Take both hands or wrists in yours, hold the children still, and look them in the eye. Say what you have to say in a low but "I-mean-business" way and keep at it until they've understood and said they are sorry.

- Remove them physically and make them spend what some parents call "time out"--a few minutes of isolation away from the family, even in a closed room. Don't let them return until they've said they're sorry. (For very young children, you may have to supervise their time in a corner or some other "punishment spot.")

- For older children, remove privileges. This means no games or television or use of the telephone. For teens it might mean no phone calls or going out with friends or use of the car. (Teens who display thoughtless attitudes and uncontrolled impulsiveness are a menace on the road and shouldn't drive anyway. You can make this clear to them: only responsible, mature adults may drive the family car.)

- Put them to work. Have a so-called "job jar" at home. This is a receptacle containing slips of paper describing jobs to be done around the house. Let the malefactor pick out three slips and then choose one, which must then be done to your satisfaction. Also, if kids complain they're "bored" around the house, direct them to the job jar. Parents who do this hardly ever hear complaints from their kids about boredom. The word "boring" disappears from the family vocabulary.

- If two siblings are quarreling and won't stop after one warning, put both of them to work on the same project: cleaning dishes, raking leaves, gardening, washing the car, whatever. This treatment usually brings about a reconciliation. Misery likes company.

I have to insert a parenthesis here: For many kids in consumerist families, being banished to the bedroom is scarcely a punishment at all. Typically, kids' rooms bulge with stereos, radio, television, and electronic games galore, and the kids live like pashas. Their rooms are essentially entertainment centers surrounding a bed.

From what I can see, many healthy families hold firmly to this policy: each child's bedroom is a place for study, reading, and sleep--period. Entertainment gadgets are only for common areas of the house, where people can enjoy them together. This policy has the happy side effect of eliminating distractions from homework. It works. And the kids learn a truth about life: When we try to work and play at the same time, we wind up doing neither--leisure is really enjoyable only when we've earned it.

In any event, whatever method of correction you use with your small children, see it as an investment that will later yield high return. Once you've established your authority in their youngest years, then you've won most of the battle. When they're older, just a businesslike warning or flashing-eyed glare from you, or even your expression of "disappointment," usually works to restore cooperation. By that time, the kids know you mean business. In child rearing as in law (and especially with the IRS), there are few things as effective as a sincere threat.

5.) Smart parents--those who live this affectionate assertiveness--work with each other to plan out different lessons of responsibility (that is, punishments) in response to their children's varying types of misbehavior. This is important. The more carefully these responses are thought out beforehand, and thus made routine in family life, the calmer and more consistent both parents can be in handling their kids' provocations.

This rational structure avoids, or at least minimizes, the problem in many ineffective families, especially when dealing with teen-agers--impromptu punishments imposed in anger, often harsh and overreactive, and resented as unfair.

Remember, you can be tough with normal children and quite effective with them if, and only if, they perceive that you're trying to be fair.

Here is a rational structure for imposing memorable correction on the kids for their wayward ways. It's based on a sound principle from military history: Those generals who chose their battlegrounds ahead of time usually managed to win--Hannibal at Cannae, Wellington at Waterloo, Lee at Fredericksburg, Eisenhower at Normandy.

Choose your battleground. Don't scatter your resources trying to correct the kids every single time they do wrong. If you tried this, you'd soon need to be fitted for a straitjacket.

Instead, establish three levels of misbehavior, each calling for proportionately heavy response. In rising order of seriousness, these are...

First, *misdemeanors*. These are minor infractions, just kiddish misdeeds arising from childish inexperience, thoughtlessness, reckless impulsiveness--such as tracking mud in the house, noisy rough-housing, throwing missiles indoors, forgetting (that is, honestly forgetting) to do chores, failing to put things away. A lot of these habits the kids will outgrow anyway. These misdeeds call for quick but low-level response, or sometimes just letting the matter go. It's like the quality control system in a factory: try to catch a sample every few times. You don't need to correct minor goofs every single time, and you might go crazy if you tried.

Secondly, *serious infractions*. These are acts where children infringe on the rights of others, especially siblings--causing offense by name-calling, taking property without permission, physical aggression, refusing to give or accept apology, using profanity, and similar deeds of barbaric injustice. Though you can occasionally overlook the misdemeanors mentioned above, you *must* correct these serious lapses of justice and charity practically every single time.

Never forget, every time you correct your children's injustices, their infringements on the rights of others, you are forming their lifelong conscience and ethics. You are preparing them for the way they will later treat their spouses, children, and professional colleagues. So there is a lot at stake here. Don't let up and don't give up.

Third, *felony infractions*. These are serious matters that endanger your children's

welfare, either now or later in life, and they call for the severest punishment every single time, whatever this might be. The kids should have the roof fall in on them.

For the youngest children this category obviously includes whatever physically endangers them now: playing with fire, wandering into the street, poking metal objects into electrical outlets, and the like. Punishment should be swift and memorable. It seems that nearly all parents, even the most pacifist, react this way instinctively.

But equally important are those wrongdoings that threaten children's welfare later on as adults--those acts that imperil their basic concepts of respect for rightful authority and the importance of personal integrity. You must impose swift, serious punishment every time your children do the following:

- Show disrespect for you personally--call you names, try to strike you, raise their voice in anger at you, say that they "hate" you.
- Attempt to defy your authority--say "no" or otherwise refuse to comply with your direction, or deliberately "forget" to do so. This pertains even in relatively minor matters, especially after you've given warning. If you direct your child to clean up a mess of his and he refuses or just walks away, then the issue becomes one of authority, not just clean-up. You must not permit him to get away with this defiance.
- Deliberately lie to you, especially after being put on their honor to tell the truth.

These three areas are vitally important for your children's welfare. *Everything you have to teach your kids depends on their respect for you and for your authority and for their own word of honor. If you lose this, you lose them.*

6.) Effective parents combine rightful authority with respect for their children's rights.

Children do have rights, of course. Not because they're children, but because they are people; and all people, even young ones, have certain basic rights. Here are the rights that great parents keep in mind as they exercise moral leadership in the family:

- *Right to privacy (up to a point).* Children need a certain security of privacy. For instance, they should have a place of their own to keep personal effects away from prying by other family members. And their normal, above-board dealings with friends should be respected as "personal," essentially no one's business but theirs.

Naturally, these privacy rights are not absolute, just as they're not absolute in adult society either. Sometimes privacy rights must give way before higher necessity; for instance, the law can force testimony under oath about some personal affairs, and it makes allowances for "reasonable search" in criminal investigations.

So, too, in your family. Your children's privacy rights give way to your parental rights

wherever some serious danger suggests itself--for instance, in possible involvement with drugs, or what you perceive as excessive intimacy with the opposite sex. But in normal circumstances, *parents who respect their children's privacy generally find that their children grow to be open and sincere with them.* If you respect their rights, they will respect your judgment, and then come to you with the truth. It is control-oriented, excessively prying parents who find their children close-mouthed, secretive, and sneaky.

- *Right to presumption of innocence.* Don't rush to judgment. Listen to your children's side of things, especially in dealing with your older children, and most especially when you did not personally witness the alleged misdeed. But by the same token, never undercut your spouse if it was he or she who witnessed things. If you think your spouse is mistaken or overreactive, then discuss the matter privately.

- *Right not to be publicly embarrassed.* Whenever you can, make corrections personally and privately, as you would in business. If you chew out your child in front of siblings or friends, the lesson is probably lost. Your child's resentment at public humiliation acts like static to cancel out your message. Corrections made privately--eyeball to eyeball--go straight to the point.

- *Right to just punishment.* An angry, overreactive punishment easily skyrockets way out of proportion to the original provocation. To be effective and long-lasting--to get the lesson across for life--punishment has to be fair. It will be fair if it's rational, and it's rational if thought out carefully beforehand, as mentioned above. Sometimes, in fact, you can even ask your son or daughter to propose a suggestion of their own for reasonable punishment: "What do you think is fair? Make me an offer." More often than not, surprisingly, their proposals turn out to be reasonable, and sometimes even more severe than what you had in mind.

- *Right to a second chance.* This means that, once apologies and restitution are forthcoming, the kids start with a clean slate. Children, like all the rest of us, resent grudge-bearing and long memories for past misdeeds that were supposedly forgiven and over with. We do not really forgive unless we also forget. When you truly forgive and forget, you show the kids that you disapprove of their faults, not them personally. Forgiveness like this is crucial, absolutely indispensable for family solidarity. The family is one place in the world where we can always count on a fresh start.

From time to time, through rage or oversight, you may blunder in doing justice to your children. Nobody's perfect. Whenever this happens, follow up with an apology.

If you imposed an excessive punishment, then retract it and scale back to whatever seems reasonable. Don't ever be afraid to say "I'm sorry" to your children, and to explain why.

Never fear that you'll seem inconsistent in their eyes. You really are being consistent in what matters most--your heartfelt determination to treat them fairly. When you apologize, you teach them a valuable lesson: you put justice ahead of your ego.

What are we talking about here? In all of this we're really talking about the way responsible grown-ups try to treat each other. You, like anyone else, would expect other adults to respect your rights to privacy, presumption of innocence, personal dignity, just punishment, and so on. You'd expect this treatment from your spouse, your employers, the law. So, *what you're really teaching your children is ethical conduct among responsible adults*. You are treating your children as adults-in-the-making, and you begin by respecting them as people.

7.) Sometimes negative guidelines are at least as helpful as positive ones, often much more so. It's sometimes useful for a parent to know what not to do--that is, what to avoid--in a complicated situation.

I used to ask veteran parents (people whose children had grown and gone) what warnings or other "negative know-how" they'd pass on to younger parents. In paraphrase, here are some bits of hard-earned wisdom they shared with me....

- To husbands: Don't neglect your wife. She needs what we all need: understanding, affection, gratitude, support, and appreciation. For sure, she doesn't get these from the kids when they're small. So if she doesn't get them from her husband either, then she doesn't get them at all. You can tell you're neglecting her if she starts complaining about small things around the house, one after another, circling around and around the central problem: your apparent unconcern for her. Wake up. Pay attention. Listen to her opinion, help her out, tell her she's great, hug and kiss her from time to time--all this goes a long way. Every time you kiss your wife in front of the children, you are, in effect, kissing each of them in turn.

- To wives: Don't undercut your husband. Do all you can to lead your children to respect their father and his authority. He simply cannot lead as a father without his children's abiding respect. Your children's growth in character, their lifelong happiness, can rise or fall on how deeply they respect their Dad. So lead them, by your example and your praise for him, to view their father as you do: a great man, a model of masculine strength and accomplishment, a self-sacrificing hero worthy of the whole family's gratitude and honor. Your children's respect for their Dad grow directly from your own esteem for him, and this is crucially important to his influence on their lives.

Listen to this story from a man in the Midwest: "I was the youngest of five children in a single-parent home. My Dad died when I was an infant, so I never knew him. My mother raised us as a widow, and she was a great woman. Every now and then, when I was getting

out of hand as a boy, and even as a teenager, my Mom would take me aside and say, 'Jimmy, your father would *never approve* of what you're doing right now! He would be very upset. So stop it...' This never failed to touch me, not once. It always brought me to my senses and made me straighten out."

Do you see? The father of this home continued to influence his children for good, even after his death, because of his great wife's love and honor for him. Because he was still alive in her heart, he was still the father of this family.

- Don't underestimate your children. Have high ambitions for their swift, step-by-step growth into maturity. We all tend to become what we think about, and kids tend to become what their parents expect of them. Even when they sometimes let you down and you have to correct them, make them understand that you see this as just a blip along the way. You have no doubt, none whatever, that they'll someday grow into excellent men and women. You're proud of them, confident in them. Always will be.

- Don't treat teenagers like large children. Think of them, and treat them, as near-adults. Pull them up, fine-tune their consciences, welcome them to adult reality. Show them how to balance a checkbook, pursue a job, work professionally, please their bosses, deal respectfully with the opposite sex. Show them how to buy good clothes, take care of their wardrobe, and dress well. When they complain, "Why don't you trust me?" teach them that you distinguish between integrity and judgment. You trust their integrity and sense of family honor, their honesty and good intentions--always have, always will. What you must mistrust for now, in good conscience, is their inexperienced judgment; that is, you cannot and will not let them hurt themselves through their naïve blunders. When they start thinking like responsible adults, then you'll trust them right across the board--in judgment as well as integrity.

- Don't ever tell your teens that the high-school years are the best part of their lives. This isn't true. Adolescence, in fact, is one of life's toughest times: coping with blunders and glandular upheavals, surfing up and down learning curves. Tell your kids, and above all show them, that every stage of life is interesting, challenging, enjoyable for anyone with a sporting, adventurous spirit. Teens who've been well brought up have a great life ahead of them, like the life they see in you. (Think about it: How many older teens and young adults are tempted to commit suicide because they believe what they've been told: the best part of life is behind them?)

- Don't let your kids weasel out of commitments. Don't let them take back their word on a whim. Before they make promises or otherwise commit themselves to a course of action, press them to think consequences through and understand their terms, because you will hold

them to their word. If they want to buy a pet, make them first commit themselves to feeding and caring for it--then hold them to that. If they accept an invitation to a party (after first checking with you), they're obligated to attend even if something more alluring turns up. If they want to take guitar lessons, make them promise to persevere, no matter what, for two or more years.

- Don't ask children if they'd "like" to do something that you expect them to do anyway. Simply tell them firmly and positively of the plan. And similarly, don't ask "OK?" at the end of a directive request--"It's your turn to put the dishes away, OK?" What you mean by this term is "Do you understand?" But they may take it to mean "Do you approve? Is this all right with you?" This misunderstanding can lead to problems.

- When you're correcting your kids and they ask "Why?"--don't argue with them. If they're looking for an explanation, give it once only. If they persist with "Why?" then they're looking for an argument, not an explanation. Close off the matter. In other words, they must take your "no" as an answer, but you don't take theirs. You can dialogue with your kids about many issues, but there's no "dialogue" about your rights as a parent.

- Don't let your kids dress in such a way as to bring shame to the family. Nobody has a right to do this.

- Don't miss small opportunities to talk with your kids. Listen politely and respectfully. You can talk with them while driving, doing dishes and other chores together, walking and biking, working on hobbies you share, tucking them into bed. If you cut down on tube-watching, you'll find slivers and chunks of time here and there. Make the time, and never forget you haven't much of it left--your kids will grow up with incredible swiftness.

- Don't shout at your kids all the time. It's a waste of breath. If one of your kids needs a talking to, take him or her out for a walk or a soda--and say what you have to say in a calm, serious way. Don't forget to listen, either--for your kids' view of things, though wrong, may still have a point. A couple of heart-to-heart talks are better than a dozen explosions.

- Don't get trapped into blazing arguments, especially with your teens, and most especially if you have a temper. Words can wound and take a long time to heal. If tempers are flaring, put off the discussion till later--that evening or the next day--when you've both cooled down. If you go too far, be the first to apologize.

- Don't forget to praise your children, and be specific about it. Kids need a pat on the back from time to time. We all do. Give praise for effort, not just success. Teach the kids this

adult-life lesson: because success depends on effort, then effort is more important than success. You always appreciate when your children try.

- Come down to your children's level, but don't stay there. Kids are kids, and you have to come down to their level to take them by the hand. But your long-term goal is to bring them up to your own level--to lead them, patiently over time, to think and act like mature grown-ups. So live like a grown-up. Enjoy being an adult on top of life, and let them see what this means. If they see you enjoy living as a confident, productive adult, they'll have a life to look forward to.

*Permission is hereby granted to reproduce this material for private use.
It is taken from the Website of James B. Stenson, educational consultant:
ParentLeadership.com.*