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Cooperation and Responsibility

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At a certain age, a typical child will say:

“Guess what, Mom, Dad? I’ve decided that you can’t tell me what to do anymore. I know what I want to do, and that’s what I’m going to do. See you later, bye!”

Many parents will respond by saying:

“No, sorry. I’m the parent, and you are the kid, and I’m going to tell you what to do, and I expect your cooperation.”

This conversation typically begins in some form when the child is a toddler, and in many families continues through the teenage years. Teaching discipline and cooperation in this manner works fairly well, for a while. But eventually, every child starts to wonder why things have to be so authoritarian. “Why can’t I make my own decisions?” the child may ask. “Why does someone always have to tell me what to do? *Why does no one trust me* to make my own decisions?”

In response, I have a different suggestion. When the child says, “You

can’t tell me what to do,” I suggest that the parent respond (in some form):

“You’re absolutely right. I agree that you will decide your behavior on your own.

“I can tell you what I’d like you to do, but I can’t make you do it; you must decide to cooperate, or not. I suppose I could drag you here and force you to obey, but you’re getting a little big for that.

“However, I will tell you what your choices are. And I will also tell you what happens if you do what I ask, and if you don’t do what I ask. I’m only going to tell you once, and then you can decide which path to choose. Then I’ll wait for your decision.”

For example, instead of saying, “Pick up your toys. Please pick up your toys. Okay, you didn’t pick up your toys, so I’m putting all the toys in the attic for three days,” you might try saying something like this:

“There are toys all over the floor. Now, I don’t care who picks them up. If you pick them up, I’m sure that you will put them

someplace where you can find them again. If I pick them up, I will put them in a box, and the box will go in the attic for three days. Now it's up to you to decide. I'll be back in ten minutes."

For a younger child, such as a toddler, instead of saying, "Get off the stairs. Get off the stairs. Oh, you're still on the stairs, so I'm coming to get you," you might say something like:

"I see you on the stairs, and you are not going to be there in fifteen seconds. Now, would you like to come off by yourself, or would you like me to come get you?"

(Naturally, my 15-month-old daughter would grin, say "Get! Get!" and turn to scramble up to stairs. That was okay, because I would chase up the stairs after her, pick her up, kiss her and say, "Oh, you're such a teaser," and carry her down the stairs giggling. But when we reached the bottom, she didn't get back on the stairs because she understood that she had made her own decision.)

Now there are four parts to this system that make it work.

1. **Tell children the consequences before they act.** They need to know what happens if they cooperate (and what happens if they don't cooperate) before they choose. This way, they can weigh whether it's worth their cooperation. Of course, you need to know what you will do if they cooperate (and what you will do if they don't cooperate) before you set the rule. Obviously, some planning is required.

2. **Children choose their behavior.** No longer will you give your children direct instructions; you will act more like a guidance counselor than a policeman. **But the parent chooses the outcome.** You must pick consequences that you can live with, regardless of whether the children

cooperate or not. If you say, "If you act out at the party then we're leaving," but you don't want to leave, then you've made it difficult for yourself. Of course, this also means that you are not permitted to become angry if they choose the "wrong" behavior; the idea is to set things up so that everyone is satisfied no matter which choice the children make.

3. Only give **one warning** of the consequences. This may be the hardest instruction of all to follow. But it is extremely important, no matter what type of discipline you are using. If your children routinely receive three warnings, they will understand that the first two don't count; thus, two-thirds of the time they did not have to accept the consequences of their own behavior, and the lesson is not taught.

4. **Follow through;** keep your promises. The children need to know that they can rely on your word to predict the consequences of their behavior. If they learn that they can't take your word for what's going to happen, because you don't always follow through, then they will have to test you in the future to discover the consequences of their actions each time.

But don't add extra punishments. Thus, you are not permitted to say, "You didn't pick up the toys, so the toys are going in the attic as I promised, and no TV for the next two hours because I'm angry." The children were not able to predict that consequence, and they have not learned that they could predict the consequences of their behavior.

Many people believe that the only purpose of discipline is to teach children to do what they are told. Frankly, I disagree. First of all, it rarely works. And second, even when it does work, they have then learned that they need to be told what to do all the time.

Instead, I believe that the purpose of discipline is to teach children to decide their own behavior, based not on a power struggle, but based on their own assessment of the risks and benefits. This is what I mean by “taking responsibility for yourself:” learning to predict and accept the consequences of your own behavior, and to choose your behavior based on your predictions of those consequences.

All children, as they grow up, need to learn to predict and accept the consequences of their own behavior. (You may know adults who have not learned this task; generally, these people are in deep trouble.) Many parents begin teaching “responsibility” in the early teenage years. But I believe that this is far too late. The skill to make decisions for yourself is a life-long skill, and the earlier in life one starts, the easier it is. In addition, the consequences one suffers as a child are less dire; failing to get a cookie or losing a privilege is much less traumatic than some of the consequences that result from “testing” behavior in adolescence.

Problems That May Arise

Occasionally, parents may say, “I tried your method, Dr. Epstein, and it didn’t work.” My response is that it depends on what is meant by “work.” If by “work” one means that the children learn always to obey their parents, then the parents are correct: it doesn’t work. In fact, nothing “works” to teach a child always to be obedient.

However, if one means that the children have learned to predict and accept the consequences of their behavior, then this philosophy always “works,” if the parent sticks with it, and if there is no personality disorder.

Sometimes, parents will comment, “I don’t think they understand the choices.” My

response is that they probably understand you perfectly well; most children have the language skills to understand these concepts by fifteen months of age. (My wife and I began this method with my daughter when she was nine months old, and she clearly understood us!) However, the children may not believe you that these consequences are predictable. Therefore, you must demonstrate that they can trust your word, and will receive these consequences, based on their behavior. You do this by being consistent, being clear beforehand about what the consequences are, and following through every single time. In this way, your children learn to believe you when you explain the consequences of their behavior.

A Word about “Consequences”

Appropriate consequences do not always have to be punishments. “Bribes” are acceptable as well, and even encouraged.

Behavioral experts recommend, in fact, that in general there should be about four times as many positive comments as negative ones, in order for the child not to perceive a generally negative attitude from the parent.

So you will always want to emphasize the positive. For example: “If you pick up your toys now, you will be able to play with them later.” In some cases, both arms of the decision may result in pleasant consequences. “You may have bologna for lunch, or cheese; which would you like?” Of course, both choices are tasty. But the child will only be permitted to eat what he asked for; he should not be permitted to change his mind after it is on the plate.

Any consequences that you threaten should happen immediately, so that the child does not later forget what he is being punished

for. Punishments should be very mild; the idea is not to make the child angry, but simply to remind the child that there was a price to pay for his behavior.

And once the punishment is finished, then it is finished. Move right back into play and productive activity. Don't continue to remind the child that you are angry because he didn't cooperate; this simply makes him feel guilty without teaching him more than he has already learned.

Most important, remember to give only one warning. Multiple warnings undercut the child's sense that the consequence was predictable. If you feel guilty about imposing the consequence, you probably should have chosen a milder one.

Dealing with the Relatives

Some members of your extended family may not understand or agree with your discipline philosophy. That's ok, as long as they don't interfere with your authority. It needs to be clear to everyone that the parents have the final say over discipline. (If relatives have criticisms, even constructive ones, they should be given out of the child's hearing.)

Many of your relatives may have raised children with a more authoritarian philosophy. They might think of your style as overly permissive. It might be helpful for the parents to have a ready explanation for puzzled relatives and friends. You might say, "We believe that our most important goal is to teach our child the skills she needs to make decisions about her own behavior. The mistakes she makes now won't hurt her. It's ok if she makes a mistake now, IF she learns from it." You might give them a copy of this pamphlet to read. If they have questions, give them my

phone number; I am happy to discuss the issue with them.

Your ability to enforce your discipline techniques with your relatives may be limited. They may feel much happier imposing their own discipline techniques when you are not around. That's fine; don't feel that you are being undermined if the discipline technique at a relative's house is different from yours. Children can easily learn that different adults have different rules, and different styles. (Of course, if you are concerned for the child's safety or health, you always have the option not to allow the child to go unattended, and to invite the relative to your house instead.)

How perfect do you have to be?

Parents make mistakes. They know it, and the kids know it. That's ok. In fact, if it were possible to be a "perfect" parent, being perfectly consistent (and never angry) during the child's entire life, the child would not learn to be flexible when dealing with other authority in the outside world which might be inconsistent and unpredictable.

We all fly off the handle sometimes. "You're grounded for the rest of the year!" "I'm going to take all your toys away!" "We're not going to Disneyworld!" It's useful for your kids to see you express a little emotion sometimes, to let them know that it's ok for them to express anger and frustration, too.

What should you do when you realize you've set a rule or consequence you regret? Don't just pretend you didn't say it. Your child will then be confused. (They may think you forgot, and fear the moment when you'll remember again.) Instead, when everybody calms down, say

something like, "Look, honey, I was angry and I said something I didn't mean. I'm sorry I confused you. What I meant to say was that I'm going to take the toys you left on the floor, just like I always promise when you leave your toys on the floor." Your children, of all people, will certainly empathize with your remorse for a mistake, and may be eager to console you! This does not undermine your authority; in fact, it reinforces it for the next time that you don't make a mistake and remain consistent. They see you really working to stay consistent and predictable.

Discipline in Public

Some children learn that their parents can be embarrassed into breaking their own rules in public. If you dread taking your child to the grocery store or a restaurant, you may be inadvertently using a less effective discipline technique there.

In public, your rules should be the same as at home. If it's not ok to throw food or shriek in a restaurant, it shouldn't be ok at the dinner table.

Even more important, your consistency should be the same, too. Don't be embarrassed if your child has a temper tantrum in the grocery store. You might decide to allow the tantrum to run its course, right there in the vegetable aisle; if you simply stand with your arms folded, don't talk to the child, and wait patiently for the screaming to end, most adults will give you a sympathetic glance and stay clear. (Those who don't can be given a polite but cool "Thank you for your opinion.") Or, you might decide that the tantrum is better dealt with by taking the child to the parking lot until it's over, leaving the grocery cart in the aisle.

Of course, you must set it up for the child beforehand. Explain, before you enter the store or restaurant, what behavior you expect, and what consequences to expect if your expectations are not met. This works even if you're alone with several children at once. "If anybody has a tantrum at McDonald's, everybody will get to stand in the rest room with me until it's over!" (Tell the staff not to clear your food...)

"Just do what you're told, please..."

There are certain chores that you may simply expect will get done without negotiation. Perhaps you expect assistance setting the table, for example. You can still present your expectations without being authoritarian. Explain how your children's help results in consequences you and they enjoy. "The more help I get, the faster dinner goes on the table." As always, if they would choose to have a later dinner, but you do not accept this, you may have to raise the ante (in a positive way). "Well, you may watch TV (or leave your chair etc.) only after the table is set." If you decide for yourself what your ultimate position is before you discuss the rule, you will not need to negotiate your expectations.

There will be occasions when this system is inappropriate, especially regarding safety issues. Bargains such as "If you run out in the street, you'll get run over by a car, but that's up to you, you choose..." are clearly ridiculous. However, if you acknowledge that, in general, the child is in charge of his own behavior, then on those rare occasions where a true safety emergency exists, your direct instruction will be recognized as unusual, and the child will be more likely to pay attention.

Some Final Comments

Remember that your purpose is to teach your children an important life skill: the ability to predict and accept the consequences of their behavior. There will be times that your children will look you straight in the eye and deliberately choose the option that you would prefer they not choose. Everyone must be okay with this, as long as the children recognize the price they are paying; if they are willing to pay the price in order to make their point that they have chosen their own behavior, then you must be willing to live with the bargain too.

You will notice that nowhere in this discussion have I suggested what rules to set, or what punishments or “bribes” to use. These decisions are yours to make as parents, and each family will make different decisions. But as long as your children understand that the behavior is theirs to choose, and that the consequences are predictable, then over time they will learn the lessons needed to guide their own behavior without parental direction.

I must warn you that very few of your friends and relatives will follow a system

like this. You may not have been raised this way yourself. That is why this written commentary is helpful, to refer to when you get frustrated. As you can see, there is a learning period for the parents as well, to get used to this system which allows a child to choose his own behavior most of the time. This does not come naturally to many people, and requires parental self-discipline. That’s okay. (You might wish to start by setting only one rule and consequence at the beginning, such as cleaning up toys.) As you become more comfortable with allowing your child to choose his behavior, and then imposing the consequences that you have warned him about, you will find that both of you learn together.

In fact, perhaps the greatest gift that parents can give their child is the gift of trust. When the child hears the parents repeatedly assure him, “We trust you to make these decisions,” then over time the child will feel trusted and empowered. As he learns that he is trusted by his parents, who are the most important people in his life, he will learn to trust himself. When this happens, you will know that you have given your child the most powerful boost to self-confidence that anyone could ask for.