

BEYOND PASSIVE COMPLIANCE

A Few Pointers for Parents and Teachers

Note: In presenting the following ideas, the term ‘child’ has been used for the sake of convenience, but the reader should keep in mind that the concepts relate just as well to the ‘young adult’ years.

1. Establish an unshakeable and unconditional friendship relationship.

Children should not have to do anything or be anything to gain our friendship. A climate of unconditional positive regard is fundamental to effective learning. When anger or hostility or any other ‘withdrawal of regard’ is used as a factor in gaining control, the child learns to be responsible for the behaviour and emotions of others rather than for his or her own behaviour.

As far as possible, maintain an emotional environment where those around you feel secure and are glad to be with you. Be emotionally predictable. Many parents, and teachers, are afraid to ‘loosen up’ for fear that the child will ‘take advantage’ of them, so they maintain an undercurrent of suppressed hostility, a sort of “don’t mess with me buddy, or I’ll bite your head off!” in order to keep ‘on top of the situation’. Keep an atmosphere of unshakeable good-will and the child will be gradually attracted by, and drawn to, the security of your inner strength.

2. Never attempt to use guilt to get a change in behaviour.

Even though children need to learn, through consequences, the nature of personal responsibility, remember—children are **not personally guilty**—all their obnoxious behaviours are simply their unwittingly learned, though inappropriate ways, of fulfilling their legitimate needs.

The object of all training is to teach **responsibility, not guilt**. Children don’t need to be encouraged to feel guilty or bad in order to increase their sense of responsibility. Consequences—natural & logical—in a climate of acceptance and love, teaches responsibility. People gain a sense of guilt when they live under the personally disapproving judgement of others, which they sense in all the non-verbal signs of rejection: anger, disappointment, frustration etc (eg. “you [or it] make/s me so angry when ...”). All such judgemental reactions tell the child that you see **them** as ‘bad’, and that their inappropriate behaviours have been viewed as deliberate and intentional. Any child reacts with ‘defence’ to such an attribution!

Every child needs to have someone ‘big hearted’ and understanding enough to view him or her as a wonderful and worthwhile human being. A child will find it much easier to ‘hear’ from someone who has shown that they love them **unconditionally** that some of their **learned** behaviours are not consistent with the ‘common good’ and therefore in need of change. Guilt inducing methods teach the child to focus on avoiding ‘blame’ rather than on acting sensibly and sociably. Such children can be slow to mature and may never fully mature into self-responsible adults. Guilt produces a degree of external conformity to ‘rules’, but never produces mature responsible behaviour.

It is ‘good parenting’ to be psychologically tough in **not** yielding to a child’s *manipulative* pressures simply to gain the child’s approval or to “keep them from being unhappy”. It is also ‘good parenting’ to remove from your own repertoire of response, **all** such emotionally manipulative pressures. Your gift of love and regard must be unconditional if you want your child to form a robust personality and stable character that is ‘Teflon coated’ against the myriad manipulative ‘pressurisers’ and emotional ‘blackmailers’ that each will meet during the course of his or her life.

3. Focus on controlling your own behaviour—not the child's.

Many parents/teachers lose control of their own behaviour in their attempts to control the behaviour of the child. In other words, the way the parent/teacher acts is not how they would prefer to act if they really felt they had a choice in the matter. Angry teachers/parents generally don't become angry because they enjoy being angry. Rather, they have simply *learned* anger [through no fault of their own!] as part of their method of control, even though, at the time, they may really believe that the situation has 'made them angry'. As soon as you become angry, the child subconsciously gives **you** the ownership of **their** problem. They are then 'dealing with you dealing with them', when what they need to focus on is 'dealing with their responsibility for choosing between behavioural options'. AVOID ALL BATTLES OF WILL in which your ill-will is pitted against the child's ill-will – ie., who is going to give-in first! Offer a choice to the child via the use of consequences that can be quickly administered and then continue with an attitude that indicates that all is still *well* between you and your child. (See point 17)

When we focus on [and thereby hold ourselves responsible for] the characteristics and quality of **our response** to the behaviour of the child, rather than focusing on [and thereby hold ourselves responsible for] the behaviour of the child [for that is the child's responsibility], we teach:-

(a) [by example] that self-control is one's own personal responsibility and not the responsibility of another, and,

(b) that choosing to behave inappropriately will result in real consequences [natural or logical] that will be disliked **by the child**. In other words, let the child [rather than the parent/teacher] be the one who experiences distress at the inappropriate behaviour and its negative results. When the child finds that the behaviour and its natural/logical results are simply not worth it [it doesn't even get an adult upset!!] then they will choose to give it up. But it is much harder for a child to give up inappropriate ways of behaviour if someone else is angrily waiting and expecting the child to change. There is something in human nature that simply doesn't wish to change if someone else wants it to! Everyone desires to have a *sense* of being in charge of his or her own life, within the physical and social restrictions that have been recognised and accepted by his or her own conscience and judgement. People who feel good about themselves find it easy to learn. This is true of both children and adults.

(c) the truth about emotions! That a lot of the negative emotions we experience in life are really just varieties of 'autogenic suffering' — learned 'suffering' used as manipulative behaviours that have been reinforced by short term results – i.e., they 'worked', in that they resulted in some evidence of control over others.

4. Don't nag!

Repeating words, with exasperated emotion, but no real consequences, only teaches children to feel that their antisocial behaviour is **painful to you**. What they need to learn is that their antisocial behaviour is going to be **painful to them**—which it always is, in the long term, in the big world of reality! When children learn—through consequences, natural and logical—that their antisocial behaviour leads to negative feelings in them, not you, they will change. Once again, this is how the natural world teaches the child to survive its many dangers—and it does so without using guilt.

5. Build your child's sense of self-worth

Don't criticise, condemn, or show **personal** disapproval. Don't make a big deal out of a child's mistakes or failures. Deal with it in a tough [once again, never simply 'give in' for the sake of peace, or to get back the child's regard], yet easy going manner that expresses a sense of relaxed confidence.

Teach the child to evaluate his or her own behaviour. "What are you doing?" [with a questioning rather than condemning tone of voice]. "Is what you are doing helpful?" "What would be more helpful?"

6. Don't encourage your child to make excuses by asking "why" type questions!

Many parents ask 'why' in a demanding way that indicates that they are not really looking for a reason, but rather to get the child to feel bad or stupid about what they have done. "Why the heck did you leave the door open when you came in", is not looking for a reason, but is really saying, "you dumb kid, can't you see how really stupid you are compared with me".

Remember, you don't need the child to 'explain' why he or she has acted inappropriately [the child won't know the real reasons anyway; but they will quickly make some up to avoid 'getting into trouble']; you simply want to know what can be done to correct or improve the situation in the future.

7. Let children know you are also human and experience difficulties [but don't dump on them!]. Ask for their opinions with a genuine desire to hear what they have to say.

Treat children as equal human beings. Don't be afraid to say, "I'm sorry about that, I really blew it didn't I. It's not your fault I got angry, I must learn not to handle things that way. Perhaps we can go back over what happened without me getting angry this time." It's only your ego that stops you making such an admission, and the ability to get above your ego is a powerful learning experience for your child. It also reinforces the view that you are not in a 'battle of wills' with your child.

8. Don't have all the answers. Help them with the process of discovery. Teach them how to go about making decisions.

Particularly in the teen years, parents need to stop trying to teach the young person things they already know but have not yet been willing to accept—having not yet fully learned the nature of reality. Some things are understood only through tough experience! As far as possible, take the risk of letting the young person learn from his or her own 'dumb mistakes' rather than always trying to get them to make the 'right' decision. Many a child has learned helplessness because of a parent's unwillingness to let the child face failure.

9. Model the quality of behaviour that you wish to teach.

Once again, don't expect a child to have more self-control than you have. Just because your 'loss of control' [in dealing with the child's behaviour] looks more legitimate than the child's 'loss of control' [in dealing with his or her world] doesn't mean to say that the child will see it that way. Sub-consciously, your 'frustration response' legitimises the child's 'frustration response'—after all, you are the one who is teaching the child how to deal with frustration! Its just that, to you, the child's frustration doesn't seem legitimate, whereas your's does—but from the child's perspective its the other way around! **Remember:** it is more important to teach the child the appropriate '**processes**' for dealing with frustration, than with what the child should see as frustrating.

10. Deal with selfish mannerisms long before they manifest into full blown behaviour patterns. Don't 'put-up-with' obnoxious behaviour until you can't stand it any longer.

This is pro-active rather than re-active parenting/teaching. Prevention is better than cure. Never allow a child/young adult to treat you with any less respect than you offer them. Let them know that they will **never** get 'satisfaction' from you unless they relate to you with pro-social behaviour. They will soon learn what works! Needless to say, perhaps, this does not mean that you take yourself so seriously that you don't engage in good humoured 'joshing' in an atmosphere of good will.

11. Give information, not justification.

Justification is attempting to get the child to accept your authority. If you attempt to do this, the child can control you by not accepting your justification. When the child says, for example, something like, “but why can’t I”, check to see if this is simply a request for information, or whether the child is making a demand that you justify your right to play the role of parent in the situation. The tone of voice will give you the clue as to which it is. Freely give information; never give justification, because if you do you will have opened yourself up to manipulative game playing.

12. Think long term.

Always try to take into account the long term effects of your methods of training. Very often, methods of behaviour control that go for an immediate, fear based, response, get a short term ‘gain’—the child complies, albeit without a sense of ownership—in exchange for a long term ‘pain’—the child’s desire to do so willingly gets less over time. The “law of diminishing returns”, means that parents and teachers who use inappropriate processes to gain what they believe to be appropriate outcomes will find themselves resorting to increasingly ‘heavy’ methods to gain decreasing levels of compliance.

13. Listen with willing and active attention.

Attempt to listen actively—with non-verbals indicating a real desire to understand, eg., head nodding, eye contact, “ah hah”, exploratory [not interrogatory] questions, etc.

14. Establish a routine.

This is a hard one, particularly for parents who hate routine themselves. However, if you want to be able to give up the daily task of reminding, reminding, reminding, it is imperative, particularly with young children, to encourage them to establish some habitual patterns of behaviour.

15. Recognise individual differences.

Do a **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator** [see www.keirsey.com], or some other questionnaire, to give you insight into your own preferred style of decision making in life, and also to gain a greater appreciation of the wide variety of other ‘legitimate’ personal decision making styles. Get to know and understand the unique styles of your younger members and encourage them to develop in their most preferred style. This is about accepting individual differences in **personal style**, not individual differences in moral behaviour. A child must always be encouraged to respect the rights of others—this is not optional.

16. Give heaps of self-initiated positive attention.

The importance of parents [and teachers] giving demonstrative, self-initiated attention and affection, cannot be over emphasised. With parents, this should involve touch—plenty of hugs and cuddles. This personal attention should not just be related to positive behaviours displayed by the child, but should be given simply because the child is alive and with you! A point of caution here; parents should be careful not to try to **pressure** their children into returning this affection; “come on, gimme a cuddle, gimme a cuddle”. Give the child room to return this affection at his or her initiative. The child should see that you give affection and attention **simply because you find it a pleasure to give it**, not because you want to get something from the child in return. In other words affection should not be used as manipulation. **Of course, always give positive feedback when the child initiates non-manipulative affection.**

17. Use consequences to teach responsibility.

Children learn from consequences - that are fair, just, and tough - in the context of unshakeable good will. Once you have explained [and if the child is old enough, agreed on] the nature of consequences and you made it clear to the child what will happen, **act**, don't nag! Don't give repeated warnings - don't count, don't threaten, don't raise your voice - just act, in a straightforward manner, without anger or show of frustration. Remember the HOT STOVE PRINCIPLE.

Once having delivered the consequence, don't assuage the child (i.e., if you do comfort the child, don't do it as if you have done is somehow 'bad' to them, or that you are now sorry for what you have done! **This is training, not punishment - you don't feel bad about training - this is 'tough love'**). Uncomfortable consequences are delivered to the child only because the alternatives to such are worse! **Short term 'pain' for long term 'gain'**.

Once a consequence is given, the relationship should continue in good-will. It is important that a child deal only with the consequence and not with any ill-will or 'hard feelings' that you may mistakenly believe they have caused you. Remember that a child will quickly and effectively learn from those consequences that follow his or her **behaviour** to the extent that he or she experiences such consequences in a climate of unconditional acceptance, and that is free from the sort of blame that induces feelings of guilt and shame.

Finally, consequences should be age appropriate and appropriate to the situation and the setting. A child's cognitive capacity – the mental capacity that forms the basis for a child's learning – develops through a number of overlapping phases.

SENSATE LEARNING PHASE

For approximately the first six years of a child's life (it varies from child to child, and girls seem to develop earlier than boys) it relates to its world in largely **sensate** ways – i.e., what come through its primary senses. Parents who rely primarily on the processes of 'reasoning' with children of this age group will be largely disappointed. The child may well be able to enter into such conversation and give the 'appearance' of reasoning, but they are more likely relating to the 'emotional content' than to the logical content. During this age the child is learning the basic skills of survival through contact with his or her environment. However, you cannot let a child learn everything by 'natural cause and effect'. For example, you cannot let a child learn 'not to run on the road' by natural cause and effect. Hence a parent may need to deliver a much less painful 'example' of such natural consequences when a child indicates a desire to manifest such behaviour. Some types of self-destructive or manipulative behaviours will not simply 'go away' if ignored. Hence, learning **during this early phase of a child's life** may sometimes need to be painful in 'sensate' ways [and if appropriately used, such experiences will rarely, if ever, be either needed or useful beyond this phase]. A child will suffer no more [and often much less] long term damage from such painful experiences than from any of its other 'natural' painful learning experiences, **so long as such consequence are reasonable, and NEVER delivered in an aggressive, malicious, or otherwise damaging fashion**. Even a casual look at how animals teach their young to survive can be instructive.

NEVER ATTEMPT TO DISCIPLINE YOU CHILD IF YOU ARE ANGRY, OR ARE EXPERIENCING ANY REAL DIFFICULTY IN CONTROLLING YOUR OWN EMOTIONAL REACTIONS. YOU ARE LIKELY TO CAUSE MORE HARM THAN GOOD! FIND YOUR OWN 'CALM' – THIS IS THE FIRST LAW OF ALL EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE.

CONCRETE LEARNING PHASE

Cognitive development during approximately the next six years of a child's life will focus more on the *concrete phase* of learning as they come to understand the 'norms' of their social groupings – family, school, church or society. If you have laid an appropriate foundation in the first phase of the child's development, the child will need very few consequences in order to learn during this phase. Discipline processes can also be more easily related to the logical consequences of the child's own behaviour e.g., a disruptive child may be required to spend time apart from the group to 'rethink' their behaviour; a messy child may simply be required to clear up the mess before they are permitted to watch TV, or some such other desired activity. Whatever the consequences, they should be meaningful and with

clear 'alternatives', i.e., 'if' you ... 'then' ..., rather than, 'you **must** do such and such...'. Both positive and negative consequences can be used in such fashion.

ABSTRACT LEARNING PHASE

From around twelve years of age onward the child is moving into an abstract thinking phase that will allow it a much greater ability to understand the *natural* 'cause and effect' basis of its world, and the more universal ethical and moral principles of life. This is the 'transition' phase from childhood to adulthood, the time when the child needs to take on the full responsibility of becoming his or her own decision maker. This does not happen over-night and parent figures need to collaborate with the young person in making the transition. They will do this best by 'getting in first' and '**giving**' over as many decisions as *safely* possible to the young person, **along with the ownership of any consequences**, in a context of good-will and trust – before the young person '**takes**' decisions out of the parents hands! When the young person blunders in the process of learning to make such decisions – as they almost certainly will on occasions – they will learn from such experiences more quickly and more appropriately if they do so in a context of parental acceptance and good-will. Parents almost need to put a big sign up on the wall that states '*No-one in our family, who makes a mistake, will be treated as if they did it deliberately. All mistakes will be viewed as learning experiences. Even if the learning is a bit tough a times!*' Reality 'bites', but it is also an effective teacher if the young person is allowed to face the 'reality' and does not have to face an angry parent or parent figure as well.

Parents of teenagers need to sit down with their 'young adults' and talk with them about the 'new deal' of 'contractual life', i.e., adults live by 'social and material contract' with others in their environment. The years of dependent 'privilege', where 'things' were provided simply because they were 'children', are coming to an end. The tough realities of 'providing for oneself' are beginning to sink into the psyche of the young adult and many parents have found the transition to be much smoother after they have discussed, in a climate of friendship ['friends', rather than 'parent-child'] the new contractual arrangement. It is as difficult for most parents to 'let go' their sense of responsibility for the well-being of the offspring, as it is for the offspring to 'pick up' that responsibility. It must, however, be done as some point, and it is safer if the parent does indeed **willingly** 'let go' rather than waiting till such has been 'taken off them'!

What about 'peer pressure'? **Peer pressure** is largely due to the fact that young people do not 'gravitate' to the source of greatest love [which is almost always their parents], they 'gravitate' to the source of **greatest acceptance**, which, sadly, is often given more willingly by their peers than by their 'worrying' parents. One of the greatest gifts that a parent can give to a teenager is to believe in them, contrary to all the evidence that the teenager provides for the opposite! Unconditional love is an almost irresistible force, and many a teenager would have found it much easier to stand against the tidal pressures of their peers if they had felt secure in the regard parents who attempted to listen rather than attempted to 'save' them through good advice. Good advice is like good food; it is found to be most appreciated by the hungry – force feeding tends to make anyone 'gag'!

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