

Rethinking Discipline: Building Stronger Connections with Your Child

If you're reading this, you're probably a parent, or maybe you interact with kids, maybe it caught your eye because of how you remember being disciplined as a child, or perhaps you stumbled upon this page and are curious. Either way, welcome!

Interacting with children in any capacity means that there are an endless amount of moments that beg for a response, and sometimes those responses are punishment in nature. Many of us default to the methods we experienced growing up, often without stopping to question their long-term impact or how it even made us feel in the moment to receive those punishments. We work with what we know and what we think has worked for us in the past. Especially during those quick, tough moments that fly by on those days when work was already overwhelming and you're trying to cook dinner and your child is fighting with their sibling and the dog won't stop barking and your phone keeps buzzing and you just remembered you forgot to pay a bill and the TV is on too loud and you just want it all to STOP!

But discipline isn't just about correcting behavior in the moment. It's about shaping a child's emotional world, their sense of self, and ultimately your relationship with them for years to come.

Reflecting on Your Own Childhood

Let's be curious. Pause and check in with yourself: *How did it make me feel when I was spanked or harshly punished as a child?* For many of us, answers probably range from fearful, shameful, confused, angered, and more.

Some might think, "I turned out fine," but it's worth digging deeper. Did those experiences actually strengthen your relationship with your parent(s), or is it possible they actually created some distance? Did they teach you understanding, or just compliance? How's your relationship with your parent(s) now?

Your answers can offer valuable insight into the kind of parent you want to be today and moving forward.

What Fear-Based Discipline Can Look Like

Fear-based discipline isn't always obvious. It relies on intimidation, threats, or physical punishment to stop unwanted behavior, and this unwanted behavior can be very subjective (i.e., running inside, not putting their toys away, yelling at their sibling, crying because they're frustrated, stomping their feet, "talking back," refusing to brush their teeth, lying about doing their homework, etc) . While fear-based discipline can be "effective" in the short term, it often teaches children to act out of fear rather than understanding, it's in the name. Fear-based discipline often leads to ruptures in a relationship, which overtime, gets harder and harder to repair.

There's a variety of ways fear-based discipline can show up:

- Threats:
 - *"If you don't stop right now, you're going to be in big trouble."* or *"Just wait until your dad/mom gets home."*
 - While these statements seem powerful in the moment and may result in your child discontinuing a behavior (jumping on the bed), it teaches them to behave to avoid punishment and not to understand the 'why' behind your reasoning for wanting the behavior to stop. It may also result in a child who attempts to hide behaviors.
- Yelling/Intimidation:
 - When a child hears an adult, someone a child experiences as bigger and more powerful, raises their voice in a way that startles them or scares them into stopping a behavior, it can teach them that emotions can be handled with even bigger, louder emotions.
 - Instead of learning regulation, such as a few slow breaths, using some movement to rest, or squishing something soft, they may learn to associate strong emotions with fear, and may carry that heightened emotional intensity into future situations.
- Physical Punishment:
 - This can show up in a variety of ways in itself, such as spanking, hitting, using objects to hit a child, etc.
 - Along with teaching fear, it can teach a child that mistakes lead to pain and "people who love me can hurt me."
 - While it may stop the behavior ("throwing a fit in public"), it doesn't teach problem-solving or emotional understanding. It instead can reinforce that physical force can be used to get others to do what they want in the future.
 - It's hard to teach someone to have "gentle hands" when they don't get that experience themselves.

- Shaming Statements:
 - “What’s wrong with you?” “You’re being bad!” “Why can’t you be like your brother/sister?”
 - These are very common and you may not even realize you say these as often as you do.
 - Statements like these, especially repeated over time, often lead to heavy weights that children carry with them through life. They stop seeing what they did, and start believing something is wrong with who they are.
 - It can teach them “I am bad” instead of, “I made a mistake.”
- Harsh or Immediate Consequences Without Warning:
 - This is often when there’s a jump straight to a punishment without giving a child a chance to correct their behavior (tossing a ball in the living room).
 - For example, instead of giving any prior reminder or boundary about the limits of where a ball can be played with, the consequence goes straight to “That’s it! No TV for a week!” The child isn’t just upset about losing TV, but they’re also confused. No one told them, or reminded them, about the rule, and the consequence feels disconnected and sudden.
 - It teaches them that the world is unpredictable and they don’t get a chance to improve. It can lead to frustration, helplessness, and/or defiance.
- Withdrawing Love or Connection:
 - “I’m not talking to you right now.” “Go away. I can’t be around you right now because you annoyed me.”
 - Your relationship with your child is the most important thing!
 - When they feel as though their connection with you is dependent on their behavior, it can create insecurity and a fear of rejection.
 - It can teach a child that love is a light switch and not a steady flame.

Many parents don’t use fear-based discipline because they want to scare their children. They use it because it works *in the moment*. As mentioned before, it’s something that many turn to because it’s how they were raised. But discipline that relies on fear often trades short-term obedience for long-term connection, trust, and emotional growth. When children comply because they’re afraid, they’re not learning *why* their behavior matters. Instead, they may internalize anxiety, secrecy, or resentment. Over time, this can damage the trust between you and your child, and reduce open communication. At the heart of any parent-child relationship are those two components, trust and communication.

Fear says, “Stop or else!” Guidance and connection says, “Let me show you a different way.”

***Campfire* vs. *Wildfire*: How We Respond Actually Matters**

It can be helpful to think of discipline like fire. A *campfire* is intentional. It's contained, steady, and purposeful. You build it carefully, tend to it when needed, and it provides warmth, light, and connection. The memories associated with a campfire can often be ones filled with joy.

A *wildfire*, on the other hand, is reactive. It spreads quickly, fueled by intensity and there's a lack of control. It can cause damage before anyone has a chance to stop it. It can be scary and sometimes we feel regretful. The memories associated with a wildfire are often ones of worry, fear, and uncertainty.

Fear-based discipline often falls under the *wildfire* category. Sometimes a punishment is bigger than the behavior, sometimes the consequence isn't even related to the behavior at hand, and sometimes it's the type of discipline that gets turned to because yelling seems easier than taking a moment to breathe and talk with your child about why throwing blocks at their sister actually isn't safe.

A *campfire* reaction doesn't mean that a behavior (using permanent marker on the wall) gets ignored. Instead, it means that you practice containing your response so it teaches instead of overwhelms. For example, "*You know that marker is for drawing on paper. Let's find a way to clean this up together.*" If the behavior keeps happening, you gradually increase your response, the same way you might add more firewood to your campfire. "*Oh, you're choosing to still draw on the wall with markers, but markers are for paper.*"

Tackling a behavior with this approach can lead to trust, emotional regulation, and an overall stronger connection with you and your child. Discipline doesn't need to burn hot to be effective. When we interact with children and respond like a *campfire*, in a steady, contained, and intentional manner, we end up creating space for children to learn, not just react.

Let's be curious again. When your child makes a mistake, does your response feel more like a *wildfire* or a *campfire*? How did the responses of your own parent(s) feel?

Looking Ahead: Your Future Relationship with Your Child

Every disciplinary moment is also a relational moment. It either builds connection or creates distance.

Some things to check in with yourself when disciplining a behavior:

- *Is this a reaction out of my own frustration, or is it aligned with the behavior at hand?*
- *Will this approach make my child more likely to come to me in the future?*
- *Am I teaching them to trust me or to fear me?*
- *What kind of relationship do I want when they're teenagers? Adults?*

Children who feel safe, respected, and understood are far more likely to maintain strong, open relationships with their parents over time.

Discipline is not just about correcting behavior. It's about teaching, guiding, and connecting. By shifting away from fear-based methods and using meaningful, age-appropriate consequences, you're not just shaping your child's behavior, you're shaping their emotional well-being and your lifelong relationship with them. How beautiful!

Parenting isn't about being perfect. It's about being intentional. And every small shift toward understanding and connection makes a lasting difference.