

# DISCIPLINE AND OBEDIENCE

## DISCUSSION PAPER

### Discipline – Its Aim

Many parents make the mistake of seeing discipline mostly as punishment, and its end as mere co-operative behaviour, effective ‘child domestication’, peace and quiet at home.

However discipline is actually *the process of leading children towards happy and responsible adulthood* or “**training, especially of the mind or character**”. So if we do not discipline (train) our children in character strengths, they will grow up to be larger versions of what they were in childhood. They will remain self-indulgent, irresponsible, egoistic, and immature in judgment.

Although discipline is validated by external behaviour it is primarily the struggle for internal self-control. Realising this and persevering in disciplining our children is one of the greatest acts of love we can do for them.

How we teach them depends on each child and family situation. We need to determine what motivates each child and to utilise that in a ‘customised’ discipline strategy. It is never too soon to start and, from experience, the sooner the better.

### The Need for Authority

To train, teach or discipline, one needs authority. Unfortunately it is common today for parents to be unsure of their authority. This may be a reaction to their experiences of the misuse of authority. Nonetheless, parental authority and respect is necessary if we are to help our children to grow in a secure, happy environment.

Parental authority should therefore always be seen as a service of love.

To persevere in spite of the opposition they receive implies that parents recognise their authority to be a service to their children, *to help them grow in freedom and responsibility*: ‘I love you too much to let you behave like that’. It would be a lot easier, *at first*, if we gave in to their demands, but because we love them we use our authority to stop them doing something that may be harmful, because we have their greater good in mind. This is easy to see in situations of physical danger but is just as necessary in areas of disciplining character.

If we wish to use our authority as a service of love to our children, the following points should be kept in mind:

- **Motives for Exercising our Authority: Good of the child or our convenience?**

Requesting something from our child involves our authority, therefore we should consider the reason for it. Is it for the good of the child or is it issued only from

our own likes, dislikes or whims? We should examine our motives: does the command spring from a rational and sensible goal for our child or is it mainly for our own convenience? Although parents have authority over their children it can be weakened by misuse, and lost altogether in extreme cases, so we must use it well.

- **Confident Exercise of Authority**

In order to be effective as parents we need to be **confident in our authority** and conscious *of its purpose as a means to educate, not dominate*. Children can sense uncertainty in their parents and will work on it until their parents give in. We must strive not to lose our authority or respect by either being too overbearing or too weak. Children who know what is expected of them are peaceful and happy; they have the security to behave well within clearly defined and understood boundaries.

- **Take Temperament into Account**

We need to consider our own temperament here as well as that of the child. For example, if an easy going mother has a strong willed child, unless that mother has confidence in her authority and conviction in her beliefs, the child is likely to get his or her way more often than not. Such a mother tends to doubt herself easily. On the other hand a strong willed mother can risk being overbearing, doing everything for her child, not giving her child opportunities to develop new skills.

- **Back Each Other Up**

Each spouse must affirm the authority of the other and be united in decision-making. The surest and swiftest blow to parents' authority in this special task of educating their children, can come from each other. Once one parent has taken a position, any disagreements should be kept behind closed doors. Later, if necessary, compromises can be made.

## **The Role of Obedience**

When dealing with young children discipline consists mainly in teaching obedience. It is through obeying their parents that children eventually learn the *self*-control to be truly free.

Nevertheless many people instinctively feel that obeying is the very opposite of freedom, initiative and creativity - values highly regarded today. This is not the case.

By obeying their parents, small children learn to say no to their feelings and desires and to make themselves do the good which is being required of them. While this is in direct response to an external requirement coming from their parents, it is still up to them to 'obey' (i.e. to go against their natural inclination and do what they are asked). In this way they develop the ability to do things which may be unappealing or difficult at first but which are necessary to be happy in life. In short, obedience builds strength of will

and self-control, without which our children will only have desires and frustrations – no matter how much raw talent they have.

Through obedience we can help our children have the self control necessary to be truly free, so that when they are older they will have the strength of character to act according to their informed convictions rather than be at the mercy of their feelings. This ability is a key factor in attaining true "adulthood" and personal happiness.

## Some Practical Ideas

- **Trust and affection underlie the practical ways we train our children.** These ways are usually:

- By example – what they see in their parents and others;
- By practice – what they do repeatedly, are led to do, or are made to do by parents and others; and
- By word – verbal explanations for what they see and are led to do.

- **Habits to Encourage from an Early Age**

If they drop something, they pick it up.

If they spill something or dirty something, they clean it up.

If they use something, they return it where it belongs.

If they cause offense, they apologise.

They say please and thank you when appropriate.

They share their things.

They are kind to their siblings.

Gratitude for all they have.

- **Demands must be few, clear, and made in an affectionate way.** Clarity of information is essential if children are to develop obedience. For very young children, the information must be simple and short and relate only to one request at a time. For these very young children the reason for the request must also be simple. If possible it is always best to give children a clear reason for the things that you ask them to do. However, if you can't, because the reasoning is complicated, then don't be afraid to say 'because I asked you to' – a two or three year old can keep asking 'why?' forever.
- **Parents must always follow through** - every request from the parents must be carried out unless extenuating circumstances prevent the child from doing so. Even when making requests of toddlers as young as two years old, parents must make sure that they comply with the request – and praise them warmly when they do. Most young children want to be 'good' – so you cannot say often enough 'good girl/boy' when the toddler completes even a simple request like 'bring me that toy'. *Each time you can't be bothered to follow through the child will grow less inclined to obey.* So if you're too tired to follow through don't make a demand.

## Conclusions

Once reasonable boundaries have been set the child can 'roam' freely yet securely. As the child grows so do the boundaries. As a general guideline parental involvement in discipline should be inversely proportional to the child's age.

If our child responds to our requests should we be happy? Have we achieved what we aimed for? If our main goal is peace and order, then maybe we have, but there is a danger of mere involuntary collaboration whenever demands are made without appealing to the individual's conscience. It is not enough for the child to have 'blind obedience'. We want our children to internalise the values we are trying to teach them - to understand and come to accept them as their own. We need to know what is going on inside our child's head not just what appears to be happening.

The aim of obedience then, is not peace and quiet or child domestication; it is to help our children acquire those underlying qualities, or character strengths, that will help them with everything else they do. **The way our children learn these qualities is through *training of the will* and for very young children this is learnt through obedience.** We have opportunities each day to practice this habit!