

DADS AND DISCIPLINE

By

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*"For the very true beginning of wisdom is discipline; and the core of discipline is love"
-Solomon*

One of the most common beliefs in our society is that it is necessary and desirable for dads to use their authority to control, direct and train their children. Dads are sometimes designated as the disciplinarian ("Wait 'til your Father gets home!") or the source of all decisions ("I know best. Someday you will thank me for this."). Part of the problem is that parents don't understand the implications of authority, how it affects children as they grow up, and what other choices are available.

To a young child there seems to be nothing that his parents cannot know or do. Because Dad is seen as such an "authority" (a super-hero), his attempts to influence the kids carry a great deal of weight. Because he can take care of their wants and needs, Dad has the power to "reward" by satisfying those needs, or to withhold satisfying those needs ("punish"). If you think that Dad's power to reward and punish (or to promise reward and threaten punishment) is an effective way to control kids, you are right in one sense and very wrong in another.

No doubt about it: power works to train kids the same way animals are trained. Power works to teach kids simple behaviors: not to touch breakable things on the coffee table or to say "please". But using power over kids only works in certain situations. The rewards have to be attractive enough to be wanted by the child and the punishments have to be strong enough for him to want to avoid it. The kid must stay dependent on Dad for the power to be there. As a kid becomes less dependent and helpless, Dad gradually will run out of power. Soon a kid can acquire his own rewards (school, sports, friends, achievements) and figure out ways to avoid punishment. When Dad's power runs out, he is left with little or no influence. How then can Dad teach complex behaviors: good study habits, integrity, honesty, kindness, and cooperation?

Children have been rebelling and defying adult authority for generations. Children, like adults, fight furiously when their freedom is threatened. Most people don't respond favorably to those who have the power to dispense or withhold reward. This is why employees of highly "fatherly" employers (those who are generous in giving benefits and bonuses as long as employees gratefully accept management's complete authority) have some of the most violent labor disputes. This is why the policy of a "have" nation giving handouts to the "have not" nation results in the weaker nation's hostility toward the giver (and after all I've done for you!).

Frustration can also manifest in aggression, retaliation, striking back, or giving Dad the "silent treatment". Some children will learn how to lie to avoid punishment. In families with more than one child, the kids will learn how to put the others at a disadvantage, make them look bad, tattle, or shift the blame. When Dad is in a power position, the kid may dominate, boss and bully other kids. When kids are over-indulged with praise and rewards, they may develop strong needs to always look good or to win, and strong needs to avoid looking bad or losing. Their needs for reinforcement are endless and tiring.

The alternative to the power struggle is a NO-LOSE method of resolving conflicts. Husbands and wives, partners in business, labor unions and company management, and countless legal arguments are resolved this way by making agreements that benefit both parties. In a parent and child conflict, Dad would have the child participate with him in a joint search for some solution(s) acceptable to both. One or both of them may offer solutions. Together they critically evaluate them and eventually make a decision on the final solution acceptable to both and sign an agreement. No convincing the other is needed after the solution has been selected, because both have already accepted it. No power is required to force compliance, because neither is resisting the decision. This method is effective because the kid has participated in the process, there is a greater chance for a high-quality decision, the child learns to develop thinking skills,

there is less hostility and more love, it requires less enforcement, eliminates the need for power, and gets down to the real problems.

Notice that there are no “cookie cutter” answers as found in some parenting books, because different solutions will work for different families and situations. It’s not “let’s do it my way this time and your way next time”. Once the problem has been addressed and both parties know what behavior is expected, it needs never to be addressed again. Dads who have used this method over a period of time report their kids have better grades in school, better relationships with their peers, more openness in expressing feelings, fewer temper tantrums, less hostility to authority figures, more responsibility and independence, greater self-confidence and a happier outlook on life. And aren’t those the very things that Dads want most for their kids!

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