



The Horizon

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From the Director's Desk

Discipline—Developing Self-Control and Self-Discipline **Adapted from Summer 2003 publication, Montessori Life**

Children are born with no control over their bodies or their behavior. They are helpless and need someone to nurture and protect them. As they develop they gain control of their bodies, lifting their heads, gaining strength in the trunk and then sitting, gaining control of the arms and legs, usually crawling, pulling up and then walking. In about one year they have gained control of their bodies, and language is developing. They can understand what is said to them, and they are beginning to use words. Now that they can control more of their world, it is not necessary to wait for someone to move them from one spot to another. They can even tell their caregiver what they want or need.

No one, however, expects a child of one year to control his behavior. The parent continues to see that the child has enough food and rest to feel content. Most babies respond to positive experiences with the growth of emotional well-being. When the child is hungry, tired, over-stimulated or frustrated, it is the caregiver who works out a solution.

Parents do not expect children at age one or two to always be calm and cooperative. They know that a child of this age can go on sensory overload and melt down.

Between two and three years of age there is a period in which the brain reorganizes itself. Until now it has had no inhibition control. If a young child wants something, he wants it now. He does not understand waiting. As the brain develops at this period, the ability to inhibit actions is growing. By age three, most children become increasingly cooperative. The maturing neurological system allows the child to control behavior.

Self-discipline is learned by most children through imitation of those around them and with gentle but firm boundaries provided by caregivers. If parents are consistent in their expectations and use rewards and removal of privileges, most children find the world reasonable. They cooperate with the caregiver.

Some children do not show this same easy development. They often have motor delays or disorders, speech and language delays or disorders, and behaviors that are not within normal limits for their age. These behaviors include attention issues, lack of inhibition control, continued temper fits, confrontational and oppositional behaviors, and/or obsessive and compulsive behaviors. The neurological functioning that allows the child to “put the stops on” is lacking. Since it has not developed normally, it must be taught if the child is to be successful in group situations. Discipline should always be done with love and support for the child. The same techniques for teaching self-control to any child apply also to the child with control issues, but they take longer and require more consistency.

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From the Director's Desk *Continued*

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SIX COMPONENTS TO TEACHING SELF-CONTROL:

I. Structure

There must be a structure appropriate to the age-level of the child or adolescent, with freedoms and limits clearly defined.

II. Imitation

Parents must model the manners and behavior they want.

III. Direct Teaching

Show the child or adolescent how to do what you want. Demonstrate shaking hands when meeting someone, making room for someone to pass, asking someone's pardon. Teach the child how to treat a guest (what activities or food does the guest like). Role play how to handle a tough situation (how to say no to an R-rated movie, drinking, driving too fast).

IV. Work

Children should help with duties around the home and yard as soon as possible, even if the family has domestic help. Children gain a feeling of competence through work. A preschool child can help pack a lunch. A third-grader should be able to do this without help. A child or adolescent can keep his room straight. This teaches organization and time management. A child who learns to make a bed or use the washing machine gains confidence from these basic skills. There is a satisfaction at all ages from simple tasks done well.

V. Independence

The parent never does anything for a child that the child can do for himself. This fosters independence, which enhances a child's self-concept. Allow children to settle their own differences if they can, and help them if they need guidance.

VI. Correction Is Specific

If a child leaves his bicycle in the driveway, he loses the use of the bike for 24 hours. Then he can try again to remember he is responsible for his bike. If a teenager comes in after curfew, he loses the privilege of going to the next event. He has another chance to be responsible on the subsequent event.

TECHNIQUES OF DISCIPLINE:

Isolation

Isolation is particularly effective in curbing attention-getting behavior (tantrums, whining, yelling) or non-social behavior (fighting, hitting).

Steps to follow:

- A. Tell the child what you are doing and why. "Johnny, do not hit others. Let's sit in this chair and get control." Use a specific quiet chair or quiet place.
- B. Isolation should take place immediately following the misbehavior for a period of time sufficient to gain control. "Come rejoin us when you can talk without whining." If the child cannot gauge this or bounces out of his chair immediately, take him back to his chair and explain again that he must stay there until he is in control. Sit with the child until this point is reached. If a child remains in the chair longer than is necessary, go to him and ask "Are you ready to join us now?" Discuss the out-of-control behavior and role-play the desired behavior.
- C. Never isolate a child in a dark or frightening place.
- D. When you decide to isolate a child or adolescent, be consistent.

Repetitive Behavior

Certain behaviors can be corrected through repetition, e.g. hanging up one's coat rather than dropping it on the floor.

Steps to follow:

- A. Show the child the correct behavior you expect.
- B. Tell him why he will repeat the behavior (because proper behavior is necessary to the family's well-being and his behavior will not be accepted).
- C. Tell him how long he must repeat the behavior. "Johnny, you will hang your coat up, drop it on the floor, and hang it up again for one minute. I will tell you when to stop. (Set a timer or check your watch as you sit with him.) Begin."
- D. After one minute, ask him, "Johnny, why did I have you hang up your coat repeatedly? What should you do next time?"

- E. Stay with him. He must go through the actions to *feel* the behavior you want. Be consistent and stick to the time limit.
- F. Do not speak in an angry or emotional voice.
- G. Thank the child for his cooperation.

Removal of Privileges

This is effective if the privilege removed is one meaningful to the child. If the child doesn't care whether he has a particular privilege, removal of the privilege will be ineffective. Find something he really cares about. Be realistic. Don't set time periods that are too long, and to which you will not adhere. Remove a privilege for a day—let the child try again tomorrow.

Behavior Modification

Certain behaviors, often annoying bad habits, can be corrected using a behavior modification chart. This chart requires the child to mark his paper each time the inappropriate behavior takes place.

Steps to follow:

- A. Work on only one behavior at a time. Choose the most annoying of several.
- B. Discuss the chart with your child. Write the behavior you want to change on the chart. Elicit his cooperation by working together to change the behavior.
- C. Each time your child behaves improperly, such as interrupting you while you're talking to others, give him a signal that tells him he must mark his chart. You may see an initial increase in the undesired behavior. Be patient and be consistent with the chart for at least a two-week period. If behavior is still erratic, combine other techniques, such as repetitive behavior, along with the chart.

Reminders

- A. After the disciplinary action has taken place, forget it and return to life as usual.
- B. If the improper behavior appears again, repeat the correction for a longer period of time (two minutes instead of one) and follow the same steps. The correction does not need to be more severe, just consistent.
- C. Carry through a disciplinary action in a calm manner. Act rationally. It's the behavior you dislike, not the child.

- D. Make the correction fit the crime. If a child uses a tool improperly, he should lose the privilege of using it. Tantrums should be accompanied by isolation only for the duration of the tantrum. Staying in isolation for an hour for spilling a glass of milk is excessive.
- E. Be consistent. Mean what you say. If you don't carry through with your initial demands, the steps taken will be ineffective.
- F. Instead of saying, "No, don't touch," say, "This is mine. You may play with this, it is yours."
- G. Honest direct communication between a parent and a child is vital. Ask the child why he is behaving in this manner. Listen carefully. It may not be a reasonable explanation to you, but it will show you the child's logic.

Let him tell you how he feels; tell him how you feel.

Sometimes our behavior is causing his breakdown. We may become aware of a behavior we need to shift.

In any home, a child with these challenges will take more of the parent's time. (For the average pre-school child, normalization is achieved in several weeks or months. For the child with behavior difficulties, the parents should expect that it will take directed effort over a longer period of time, perhaps all the years between ages three and six.) Even if a parent did not know how to direct teach in the preschool years, it is still possible to change behaviors in a child after age six, 10 or 12, or even in the high school years, but is much harder. If a parent accepts this fact, much of the frustration and impatience will fall away. Each child is different. The parent cannot just give up on the more difficult child. A parent's job is always to help the child attain self-control and self-discipline.