

10 Tips for Disciplining Traumatized Children*

By Barbara Tantrum

Kids with trauma (and the more trauma, the more true this is) are very vulnerable when they are disciplined, so you want to discipline very carefully. Try to be as gentle as you can while still holding reasonable and safe guidelines.

This is a collection of my best tips:

1. Expectations: Parents come in with a broad spectrum of expectations - some parents feel like they are failing as parents if their children don't have perfect table manners and some parents who believe any boundaries at all would be harmful. You're aiming for halfway in between those two.

Examine your expectations based on your own childhood and adjust as needed. We tend to parent with the expectations that we were raised with, and this doesn't take into account the trauma your child has suffered. Think about your non-negotiables, those you'd really like, and those that would be nice someday. Such as, a non-negotiable could be no violence against anyone in the family, you would really like to see your child work on being able to calm down when they are feeling dysregulated, and table manners could be nice someday. When working with traumatized children you also have to adjust your ideas of justice - not every action needs a consequence, and you may find yourself worried that they "will get away with it." Your goal is to heal trauma and equip them to live as functioning adults, if you focus on that goal then it can be easier to choose disciplinary techniques based on what they need, not on your sense of justice.

2. Your own emotions: Be in control of your own emotions, especially anger. If you feel angry, give yourself a time-out, saying, "I'm feeling angry right now and need to sit in the other room for ten minutes and be quiet so I be calmer." This is good emotional modeling. Kids do what is modeled (eventually). Kids with physical and emotional abuse in their history will try to get you angry because they're testing you to see when you're going to beat them. Calm and consistent presence will eventually make them feel safe, but testing is part of that. It is very normal and natural to feel angry in response to strong anger from your child, but they will not be able to calm down if you can't do it first. You cannot overcome anger with anger, it just leads to explosions. And when you are angry and defensive you are in your "doing brain" rather than your "thinking brain" and that means that you're not at your best parenting as well. Our brains contain something called mirror neurons, which actually reflect and cause us to feel the feelings of others around us (this is how we have empathy). So when your child is really angry, you will feel that anger. But, if you are able to contain and to calm that anger, then your child can start mirroring your calmness. Also, parenting children with trauma will bring up your own trauma, even if you think you have dealt with it before. If you find some of those issues coming up for you, please seek your own therapy so that you can deal with those feelings and it won't affect your parenting.

3. Emotions first: You always want to address the emotions first before problem solving/advice/consequences. Kids with trauma can have a hard time identifying emotions and dealing with emotional dysregulation. For instance, one weekend we had a child be really nervous about an upcoming event and was acting out, yelling at my husband and throwing things when we asked her to help join in the family and pick things up around the house. I sat with her, helped her regulate her breathing by taking deep breaths, then got her to talk about what she was feeling (nervous about the upcoming event, and frightened that we would kick her out because she'd been naughty). If a child can't identify their emotions, take a guess: "I wonder if you might be feeling nervous about school starting tomorrow." We apologized for where we hadn't parented perfectly, she apologized, and we gave her some time to cool down. We spent time reassuring her that we loved her and would not kick her out even when she was naughty, and we gave her a lot of hugs. Then the next morning I let her know the extra chores she'd have for missing the ones yesterday, which she did happily. Notice the consequences were natural (making up for chores she missed), non-punitive, and restorative. Also, do not discourage expressing what we would see as negative emotions. You want the child to express what they're feeling verbally instead of physically. It's best to say that emotions aren't bad, but what you do with them can be. Then you can coach child on how to handle really strong emotions with different tools (visualization, sensory exercises, breathing exercises, etc.). For example, you can say, "Wow, I hear that you really hate your sister. You feel really angry that she said that to you. Thank you for telling me how you feel instead of hitting her like I know you wanted to do." (Pause for more discussion, and then later say,) "What is something we can do to help you get your anger out that won't hurt anyone?"

4. Avoid power struggles: Kids with trauma backgrounds are driven to get into power struggles because they are very desperate to feel some sense of power in the midst of a lot of feelings of powerlessness. I had a professor that said that if you are sitting with someone with control issues, look for how they are orphaned. Control is an orphan wound; children that grow up with dependable, loving parents feel taken care of and usually do not feel like they have to control everything. Children that feel abandoned, abused, or that the world is not safe feel like they must be in control to keep themselves safe (this is especially true with pre-verbal trauma and separation). They do not do this to drive you crazy, but it is very wise to stay out of the power struggles because you cannot win. It's like arguing with a 2 year old, if you've entered the argument you've already lost. To avoid power struggles, first give them as much power as you can (choices, responsibilities, respecting their opinions). Second, recognize power struggles as the child giving you rudimentary respect (they wouldn't be looking to struggle with you if they didn't recognize your power). Recognizing that this is actually a form of respect should help you keep your cool. Third, have some good skills to sidestep the inevitable power struggles. There are two sayings from books I've stolen that I use all the time.

One is "I love you too much to argue with you" and the other is "nice try." "Nice try" works with strong-willed kids who are trying to test you. It diffuses power struggles while not shaming the child. As in, "I see you're trying to break the dress code again. Nice try. Go ahead and change before you go to school." "Hmm, it seems like you're trying to talk me out a curfew we have already set.

Nice try. You can either choose to come home on time or you can choose for us not to trust you to go out. Hmm, I see you're still trying to argue. I love you too much to argue with you." Then leave. Do not hang around and argue, do not get flustered, and do not feel like you need to prove that you have the power. You already have the power or your child would not be arguing with you.

5. Time ins: Time ins are good for teaching self-control when kids are out of control, hurting someone is best dealt with something to make up for what they did. Time ins consist of removing the child from the stimulating situation, having the child sit with you until they are calm (not usually cuddling or entertaining, you should aim to be present but boring). You can help the child regulate their breathing or encourage the use of a soothing or calming tool or behavior. Enforcing separation for discipline (like time outs or going to your room) will reinforce to the child that they are bad and it will not help them calm down. Time ins should not be viewed as punishments but rather time set aside to calm down. You can model this yourself - if you are feeling upset verbalize your emotions and model taking some time to calm down.

6. Know your child: Always watch your kids closely and how they react. You may not be able to predict what is going to affect what. If kids have a bad reaction to something, don't use that again; be sensitive. Some things can be triggering for some kids and reassuring for others. Try and figure out their triggers, but be aware that you may not ever know why some things are triggers. Also, your child needs to know that you hear them. Especially when upset, a child will feel reassured if you can repeat back to them what they are saying, even if it feels ridiculous. For example, I have made statements like, "I hear that you hate me. I hear that you think I've ruined your life." You don't have to agree or correct what the child says, though when they are emotionally regulated you can discuss what they said.

7. Give choices: If your child is oppositional, do not give them a discipline they have to cooperate with. IE: if you say you must go up to your room, this is a set up for opposition. Be more creative. Say, "You can choose to go up to your room to calm down or you can choose another way to calm down. What would you like to do?" You can leave the room if you need to. Do not decide on consequences, if any, until kids are calmed down. If your child is dysregulated, getting them regulated is the first priority. Give choices as much as possible. For kiddos that feel like their life is out of control, give them as much control as you can. The trick to giving choices is to give

two choices that are okay with you. Don't say, "you can either wear appropriate clothes or go to school in your pajamas;" say, "I can see why you want to wear those short shorts, they are stylish (identify and empathize with desire). However, those are too short for the dress code at school, so you can wear longer shorts or wear pants." Or you can say, "Your choices for your veggie is carrot sticks or cucumbers, which would you like?"

8. Effective Consequences: Consequences, if given, should be as logical and natural as possible, and also short-term. If an older child is irresponsible with their electronics, then they should lose them for a day. Two weeks is difficult to comprehend and will leave the child feeling defeated. For a young child, the toy can go into time out for ten minutes or so. Or, for slightly older children, they can do something to make up for who they hurt. We had good success with the rule that if you hit your sister you do her chore for the day to make it up to her. It can also be really helpful to have kids "practice" the right behavior in order to make up doing it wrong before, this is also called "do overs." Make as much as you can into a game. Saying, "I'll bet I can count to ten before you get into your bed!" is more effective than telling the child to go to bed immediately. Or for the kid who is slow about buckling up, say, "I'll bet I can get my seatbelt on before you do!" Table manners can be a game too. Be as consistent as possible.

Consequences should never be given while the child is emotionally dysregulated or in response to a PTSD reaction (see tip 3).

9. If-then setups: If-then set ups are the best. For instance, you say, "You seem really angry and are yelling at me. I can tell you feel strongly about this and I would love to talk to you about it. Let me know when you're ready to talk to me in a calm voice and I would love to talk with you." Or, "When you have figured out how to make that up to your sister, then you can go outside and play." "When you are done with your homework and your room is clean enough we can walk through it without killing ourselves, then you can watch tv." Note: do not do this if there is something you need to get to, only use it when the child is the one who wants to get somewhere or so something.

10. Do not use any form of touch as discipline. This includes spanking and holding. However you feel about physical discipline generally speaking, it is not helpful and actually pretty harmful for kids with trauma and/or attachment challenges. If you spank a traumatized child they will be triggered, see you as the abuser, and it will harm their attachment to you. You want your touch to be comforting, not triggering. Also, be very careful about touch if the child is triggered or upset. Some therapies recommend holding kids if they are really out of control, but I would caution against this; it can really be triggering for kids and it likely won't help them calm down. If holding must be used to prevent a child from engaging in serious self-harming you can, but it should be clear it's about safety, not discipline. This is also a very serious

psychiatric situation, if your child engages in serious self-harm that requires this kind of intervention you must talk to a therapist, crisis line, or ER before they can be left alone. For some kids any touch can be upsetting, and especially so if they're triggered. A child could automatically lash out with a punch if you touch their arm when they're triggered, even if touching her arm is an attempt at soothing. Withholding food should also never be used as a punishment. For kids with a history of food trauma this will leave them feeling not safe. Discipline should not be mean, overpowering, punitive, shaming, or triggering. Do not make the mistake of assuming what works with non-traumatized kids will work with traumatized kids, usually you need to use some different techniques.