

## INSIGHTS

### Do's and don'ts of discipline



Season one of *Parental Guidance*, a reality TV program that aired in November 2021 on Channel Nine, brought several parenting controversies to the fore. One of these was a challenging conversation around discipline.

During the show some parents were aghast when a mum and dad from Newcastle, NSW, disclosed that their discipline included smacking. A couple from South Australia's Barossa Valley divulged the occasional washing of their boys' mouths with soap if they lied or swore. Meanwhile, our "attachment" parents from Melbourne were unwilling to countenance any form of punishment when their children had meltdowns or behaved in an oppositional way.

Discipline is one of the most confusing – and challenging – topics that parents grapple with. Unfortunately we have inherited centuries of unhelpful ideas, and they continue to interfere with what science is showing works best.

#### What is discipline?

The first definition of "discipline" in the dictionary is "punishment". But this is a relatively new way of understanding the word. Until a couple of hundred years ago, to be disciplined meant to be shown a way to follow. Discipline literally means to teach, guide, and instruct; or to show the right way.

#### Why traditional discipline doesn't work

Most parents think of traditional discipline as punishments to administer to their children when they misbehave. These punishments can take the form of smacking, time out, grounding, withdrawal of privileges, and so on. In the lead up to these punishments, many parents try bribing, threatening, and yelling. Eventually they crack.

While there may be, from time to time, a need for these discipline approaches (that is, for punishment), the reality is that science has shown us there are better ways. When we punish, we teach our kids all the wrong lessons:

- Might is right. If you're big, you can make the little people do what you want
- Power gets you what you want
- Other people's reasons don't matter
- Mistakes are bad

Perhaps most important, punishing our kids makes them more selfish. They sit in their room and hate us and their siblings. They blame others rather than taking responsibility. Traditional discipline ruptures the relationship between parent and child.

Traditional discipline lacks compassion, empathy, understanding, and perspective. It leaves our kids feeling unworthy. The real reason for this is simple: punishment is about making someone pay a price; exacting retribution. Punishment is about hurting others.

## The secret to perfect discipline

Real discipline is not about hurting. Real discipline is about helping. When we teach, guide, and instruct, we show a better way for a child who is struggling. The following ideas will help you get your discipline aligned with the best outcomes:

### Children are people too

Sometimes we forget that children are people. They seem like impediments in our otherwise well-ordered life! But they have feelings, hopes, dreams, and challenges. Seeing them as people helps us to respond to them with kindness, even when they're being challenging.

### Understand Development

We forget that our children are wearing "L" plates while they learn how to do life. They don't quite know how to behave yet. But if it takes 5 years before they can tie a shoelace, it will take even longer before they can regulate emotions and behaviours. Some adults still struggle. Be patient while they develop.

### Don't confuse motivation with ability

We sometimes get mad at our children when they're not playing by the rules. But often it's not because they don't want to be good. It's because they don't know how. They're too tired, they're hungry, they're stressed. Or maybe they're all of the above. We discipline best when we recognise their capability in the context.

### Get curious, not furious

When a child is being challenging it's tempting to explode. It's better to explore. It's tempting to reprimand. It's better to understand. It's tempting to be furious. Instead, get curious. When we take the time to understand their perspective, problem solving gets easier.

As we focus on teaching and guiding our children, the data points to better outcomes in behaviour, both now and in the long term. Kids with parents who practice childrearing in this way are more likely to do well in school, with peers, and make better choices. It's a hard way to parent, but when we invest for the long-term, the results are worth it.

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## **Dr Justin Coulson**

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel 9's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families podcast. He has written 6 books about families and parenting. For further details visit [www.happyfamilies.com.au](http://www.happyfamilies.com.au).