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Learning Limits and Rights of Others

"Children, obey your parents, for it is right that you should. 'Honor your father and mother' is the first commandment with a promise attached, in the words: 'that it may be well with you and that you may live long in the land'.

You fathers, again, must not goad your children to resentment, but give them the instruction and the correction, which belong to a Christian upbringing."

Ephesians 6:1-4 (NEB)

Discovery of the creative self must be kept in balance with the requirements of an ordered home and community life. Neither the Christian gospel nor child development says that children need complete freedom. On the contrary, they need adults who will help them know where the limits are.

Children come into this world, not knowing anything about it; but begin immediately the process of finding out. They come into the world as uniformed persons who need help in learning how to behave in this society. It is our task as parents to help them learn. If we can see discipline as a learning process, we can limit our children's behavior without making them feel guilty or hurting their self-esteem. We want our children to grow up as responsible, self-regulating persons who are able to make decisions about their behavior based on principles of right and wrong. As they grow older, they will have to make decisions without our help.

Discipline—What Is It?

Learning limits, or proper behavior can be thought of as discipline. The word "discipline" is usually thought of only in terms of punishment, but it has a much broader meaning. It is possible for discipline not to involve punishment at all. The word "discipline" is related to the word "disciple." What is your mental picture of disciples? Persons who follow Jesus, patterning their behavior after his? In many ways our children are our disciples just as Peter, James and John were Jesus' disciples in learning mental and moral skills.

Parents get caught in the dilemma of whether to be authoritarian; always tell a child what to do; or to be permissive, never tell a child what to do. Perhaps no one today totally adopts either extreme, but there are dangers in moving too much to either end of this continuum.

The authoritarian approach gives children in the family no rights in determining their behavior. The parent rules like an absolute monarch. Children have no voice. This method of total parental power holds danger for the development of the children even if it does allow a very orderly house. Self-esteem is not built by an environment which communicates "You can't make decisions for yourself. An adult must make them for you", or "Your feelings and ideas are unimportant."

Children raised under strict authority sometimes seeth with anger which cannot be expressed. This anger eventually comes out in destructive behavior or rebellion. Children need practice in making their own decisions; so that when they are older, they can make them on their own. If they have had no practice in thinking through difficult ethical decisions, then as adults they seek some authoritarian figure or strict way of life to tell them what is right and what is wrong.

Children who grow up with all the power in the family do not have practice in thinking of others. They may grow up selfishly, without respect for their parents, because their parents have not exercised their proper authority. Young children see their parents as god-like. If the god-like adult gives away all their power to the children, the children feel lost and overwhelmed. They may feel their parents should be interested enough to make them stay within limits. They respect no one—not even themselves. Children from overpermissive homes have more

difficulty behaving in school and community life because they have had no practice in learning limits at home.

The most effective way to teach children proper behavior and respect is a path between the authoritarian and the permissive extremes. If we believe as Christians that all persons are worthy of respect then parents must respect their children and children must learn to respect parents.

In a Christian home there must be mutual respect and some give and take on the part of both parents and children. Children need practice in making decisions. They need to learn to compromise and to negotiate with others. They can begin to learn these skills in the very early years on a limited scale. Brian may not choose his bedtime, but he can choose the two books he would like to read. Jennifer may not hoard all the crayons from her friend Terri, but she can negotiate with her about who will use the red crayon first.

When parents let children participate in decisions that affect them, it helps the children's self-image and frees them to respect others. Dorothy Briggs has stated that children begin learning how to live in a democracy by participating in family decisions.

How Self-Control Develops

Learning self-regulation or self-control is a slow process that begins with a two-year-old and is not complete until six or seven years later. True self-control happens when persons stop themselves from doing something they want to do, not because someone else has stopped them. The control is internal rather than external. To be able to control actions, persons must be willing and able to think. An example might be, "I want to eat the last cookie, but I won't because Jamie hasn't had one."

To be able to think of the other person requires empathy. Empathy means to be able to put yourself in someone else's situation—to understand their feelings. But in order to empathize, persons have to know who they are. We cannot love our neighbor as ourselves until we first know ourselves.

Young children who are learning who they are cannot understand another person's feelings. Many two-year-olds cannot share—and should not be expected to—because they are so involved in the discovery of themselves.

"I don't agree!" said Mrs. Lee upon hearing someone say

that we can't expect two's to share. "It's not fair to the older children. My five-year-old has to share, but my two-year-old son doesn't?"

"No," replied her friend. "You create an environment so that your two-year-old isn't required to share."

"Well, what if my son has two cookies and his sister comes along and wants a cookie? Does he have to give her one?"

"Yes. You would give your daughter two more cookies. If there were only two cookies to begin with, you would only give your son one cookie and save the other for your daughter. You might say to your two-year-old that he could have one and that you were saving one for his sister."

We talk to two's about others rights and feelings. We provide enough toys so that they don't have to share, but when trouble arises, we talk to them about the rights and feelings of all the children involved.

"Mike, you may not color on Lori's paper," says a teacher. "This is your paper. You color here. Lori colors on her paper and not on yours."

As two-year-olds, Mike and Lori have their first experiences with the crayons, they learn where the limits are in using crayons.

Three-year-olds have more skill in using language and have a better idea of who they are. So they can begin to talk to one another about their intentions and their feelings. But they need help in knowing how.

Young three's usually attempt to solve problems by shouting and hitting. Adults can help them learn by setting some ground rules that teach respect for persons and care of possessions. What these ground rules are would depend upon you and your family, but they need to be of a kind that protects the rights of adults as well as children.

Helping Children Learn to Negotiate and Compromise

Four's and five's can begin to learn to negotiate about the use of toys. In a classroom situation, I try to help children learn to use words to solve problems. For instance, when Sean was playing with a truck that Jason wanted, Jason came over to Sean and said, "Sean, I want that truck."

"No." Sean replied. "I'm playing with it now."

"But I want it now!" insisted Jason.

"It's my turn now," said Sean, "and I'm not through with it."

"I'm going to build with blocks until you get through. Will you bring it to me when you are through?" asked Jason.

"O. K." replied Sean.

These two boys have learned how to negotiate. Jason tried hard to get Sean to give up the truck, and Sean might have if he had been ready. When Sean would not give it up, Jason could ask for a turn. Sean could then play in peace until he was through with the truck. Jason could do something else with the assurance that he would have the next turn.

Some solutions to problems are not simple. Sometimes an adult needs to step in to discover what each person's concerns are. Sometimes the only fair thing to do is for the adult to state the problem as it seems to exist, check with everyone involved, state some alternative solutions, and ask the children what they think the solution should be. The children can usually solve the problem themselves and save the adult from having to be judge and jury. If the children don't or can't come up with a solution, then the adult should try to get the children to agree to one of the suggested alternatives. Hopefully the adult can help the child find a satisfying activity while waiting for a turn. Feelings may be hurt, and they need to be dealt with. Even the most difficult interpersonal situation can become a learning experience.

It is helpful for adults to stress to children that limits or rules apply to all the children. Chris started to knock down Kelly's block tower. Chris' mother stopped him. "I can't let you knock down your brother's block tower," she said. "He built it, and he's the only one who can take it down."

"But I just wanted to watch it fall," Chris defended himself.

"I know," his mother replied with real understanding. "But Kelly's block tower is his, and I can't let you knock it down. I won't let Kelly knock down your tower when you build one either. Only the person who builds the tower can knock it down."

When young children develop a strong self-image—when they are comfortable being themselves, then they are free to become sensitive to other person's feelings and needs. Sensitivity to others cannot be dictated, but it can be learned by experience.

Children do not learn sensitivity, for instance, by being forced to say "I'm sorry" whether they feel sorry or not. They do learn it

when an adult will say, "Janie feels sad and left out because everyone has play dough except her. Could you give Janie some of yours so she can play, too?" The other children now have some idea of Janie's feelings, and a specific, constructive suggestion about how to help Janie feel better. Gradually children will be able to think about their behavior toward people and things. They will be able to do what adults want them to do because they have internalized the principles that adults have taught them. They have learned to obey commands but also to consider the other person and their feelings.

Praise is a Powerful Tool

The most powerful tool parents and teachers have to reinforce behavior is praise. Praise which really builds self-esteem and promotes responsible behavior is pointed toward the behavior, not the being of the child. As we discussed in Chapter Two, we need to communicate to our children that we love them no matter what they do. The praise we use to reinforce proper behavior should be directed specifically at the behavior. When Matthew spontaneously shared some of his candy with his sister, his mother said, "That's a very generous thing to do, Matthew. I'm glad you wanted to share with Amy." Her comment let him know that she could see that he was making progress toward understanding someone else's feelings.

Teach Children to Care for Things

It is important to teach children to respect and care for the things we have. Of course, things are less important than people!

We do not want our children to be materialistic, but they should learn to take care of what they have. Adults can help them learn. Ella Jenkins, a folk singer who sings for and with children, says we should teach children to care for clothes, toys and musical instruments so we can use them again next time. This means:

- (1) provide places to store the children's things, and help the children know how to care for possessions.
- (2) toys with pieces should be put together before putting them away so pieces don't get lost.
- (3) return play dough to its container after use so it doesn't dry out.

- (4) Inside toys should not be left outside in the weather.

We can teach these values by communicating that since these things are important to the children, they will want to take care of them.

Consequences Teach Limits

What happens when children do not behave as we would like for them to do? What happens when they do not abide by limits? Do we punish them? There is a way to help children who go beyond limits which continues the idea that discipline is a learning process. Spanking children may or may not teach them not to hit. We should let children experience the natural consequences of unacceptable behavior when it is possible and safe. We wouldn't want our children to suffer the consequences of running into the street in front of a car but they can experience other consequences.

When Shanna was very slow eating her breakfast, her mother told her clearly that the meal was over when the other grown-ups and children had finished eating. Shanna continued to dawdle. When everyone else had left the table, Shanna's mother began to clear the dishes. She left Shanna's dishes until last, but Shanna still ignored her food. Her mother removed her dishes and cleaned the kitchen. Later when Shanna complained of being hungry, her mother was sympathetic but firm. Shanna would have to be hungry until lunch time, but she would soon learn to eat breakfast.

When two-year-old David colored on the wall with crayons, he was required to help scrub the marks off the wall. It took a long time, but David remembered the incident and did not mark on the wall again. His father had expressed disappointment when he discovered David's wall scribbling. He had been firm about David's staying with the cleanup job but had not made David feel guilty or ashamed. He later provided David with some very large paper to use for coloring. It is acceptable for David to color on large paper, but not on the wall.

Sometimes the consequence of unacceptable behavior may involve depriving children of something important. If David had colored on the wall again, he might have had his crayons taken away for three days. Deprivation must be reasonable for the child. To take away toys for weeks or months is punishment, not a consequence which promotes learning.

Consequences for continued difficulty between children might be to separate them or to isolate the one who is especially disruptive. Before such drastic action is taken, however, parents or teachers should try to get children to talk about the source of the troubles and work out the difficulty.

Lisa and Angela were playing house, but Dorsey kept interfering with their play. He would knock the dishes off the table and run away laughing. Lisa's mother was nearby and noticed what was happening. Lisa and Angela finally complained to her about Dorsey's behavior. They were really asking for help in managing him. Lisa's mother talked to Dorsey and to the girls about what was happening. She felt that Dorsey wanted to play, but he wasn't sure how to get into the game.

She said, "I think Dorsey really wants to be somebody in this pretend family. Is that right, Dorsey?"

Dorsey nodded.

"Well," she asked the girls, "Who could he be—the father, the doctor, the mailman, the grandfather?"

"The grandfather!" both girls exclaimed in unison.

If Dorsey had not been able to cooperate with the girls and had continued to disrupt their play, Lisa's mother would have had to insist that he play with something else or even that he go home. But Dorsey and the girls learned more about problem-solving with mother's help than if Dorsey had been punished.

Learning Limits and Rights Is Religious

The child's need to learn limits and to become aware of the rights of others is a religious process. Jesus taught that we must obey God's law and that we should treat others with the same respect we want from them. The writer of Ephesians reminds us that mutual respect is necessary in the family. Children who begin to learn the proper limitations of their behavior in the preschool years are developing the skills and attitudes needed to live ethical lives later.

If children are to be able to live in the spirit of the law through inner discipline and concern for others rather than just obeying a rule, then they must be taught the reason for the rule as well as the rule. Children should also be permitted to help set the rules. Rules should develop a concern for persons.

Children who have had experience in trying to understand

others' feelings will be able, as they grow older, to understand why the church is concerned with moral and ethical issues. They will be able to understand why the church is concerned about hungry people around the world as well as about the older people in their own community. They will be able to empathize—to feel with others—to understand other persons as children of God. They will be able as adults to make decisions on ethical issues that may not exist now . . . issues to which we cannot teach the answers in the present because the issues do not exist. But the truth of God's love and concern for all persons will always exist, and we can begin to teach this concern to our children now.

Things to Think About

1. Is my method of discipline teaching my children to be self-regulating or does it just maintain order?
2. How could I make discipline more of a learning process?
3. Cite instances which show that your child is growing in feelings and concern for others.
4. Which rules in your family may be unnecessary?