

EFFECTIVE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

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Parents and other adults who work with children are consistently faced with the challenge of managing children's behavior. This article focuses on adult's styles of interacting with children and begins a series that will explore research-based principles for effectively managing children's behavior.

"My child never listens to me!" "She won't pick up her toys!" "He won't clean his room!" Such frustrated exclamations are all too familiar to many caregivers. One area that is continually of concern for parents and other adults who work with children is behavior management. When considering behavior management, adults often tend to focus on how children control (or do not control) themselves. However, by observing effective managers in a business setting, for example, we realize that effective management is implemented by the individuals in charge, not by the people being managed. Effective behavior management is not so much about what children do. Instead, it involves adults' behavior, and research shows that adults vary in both discipline and caregiving styles.

Discipline Styles

One common misconception about discipline is that discipline is synonymous with punishment. The Latin root of the word discipline, however, means "instruction" or "knowledge." Thus, discipline is really a process by which adults teach children and convey knowledge about appropriate behavior for various situations. However, some methods of discipline are better at achieving this than others. Research suggests that there are at least three discipline styles. The first, power-assertive discipline involves such adult behavior as spanking, withdrawal of privileges, and threats of punishment or physical harm. Children respond to adults' requests out of fear, rather than respect. Consequently, children's motivations for appropriate behavior are external, and they conform to expectations to avoid punishment. However, when children find themselves in situations where they will not be "caught," they are likely to engage in inappropriate behavior.

The second discipline style, love withdrawal, involves such adult behavior as refusals to speak or listen to children, threats to leave children, or expressions of dislike and disappointment. Adults who practice this discipline style often give children the proverbial "cold shoulder" when inappropriate behavior occurs. As a consequence, children conform to expectations because they fear abandonment or the loss of adults' love and affection. Like power-assertive discipline, love withdrawal produces external motivation for appropriate behavior.

The third discipline style, induction, incorporates the true nature of discipline: teaching. Adults who practice induction provide children explanations for appropriate behavior as well as reasonable consequences for inappropriate behavior. Because children understand WHY certain

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actions are expected of them and others are prohibited, they internalize reasons for these behaviors. As a result, children's motivation to behave appropriately comes from within, and they are more likely to engage in expected behaviors even when they are in situations where they are not being watched and thus will not be "caught." An additional benefit of induction is that children will be more likely to understand the effects of their behaviors on others and exhibit empathy.

Caregiving Styles

Research on caregiving styles also tells us something about the most effective ways of interacting with children. This research suggests that caregiving behavior can be organized along two dimensions: demandingness and responsiveness. Caregivers vary in the demands that they place on children. Some adults establish high standards for responsible behavior, and they expect children to live up to those standards. Other adults, however, place few demands on children and seldom try to control children's behavior. Responsiveness involves warmth, affection, and the degree to which adults consider children's ideas, feelings, and perspectives. Some adults are affectionate and receptive to children's ideas. Additionally, these responsive adults allow for some give-and-take between adult and child in establishing standards and consequences for behavior. Other adults, though, are more aloof and are less likely to consider children's perspectives. The contrast here is similar to the contrast between a democracy and a dictatorship. Although both involve some sort of government or management, they differ in the extent to which they consider the voice of the governed. Studies demonstrate that the most effective caregiving style includes both high expectations and a high degree of responsiveness. Effective caregivers clearly communicate high standards to children, but they are also flexible and reasonable in their expectations, modifying them to accommodate the needs or perspectives of the children. Children of this type of caregiver are more responsible, better adjusted, and have higher self-esteem than children of less responsive or demanding caregivers.

Conclusion

In sum, research on discipline and caregiving styles indicates that cooperative communication is crucial in adults' interactions with children. Effective caregivers clearly convey high expectations to children and provide reasons for expected behaviors, while remaining receptive to the perspectives, suggestions, and needs of children. Additionally, effective caregivers are nurturing and responsive to children, even when mistakes occur, because they view discipline as a teaching and learning process.