

Healthy phone numbers

S.F. General Hospital, Emergency: 821-8111
 Crisis-suicide intervention: 221-1423
 Poison Control Information: 476-6600
 Mental Health Info & Referral: 387-5100
 S.F. Health Department: 554-2500

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SATURDAY HEALTH SPECIAL

Discipline dilemma

How do you raise your child to be emotionally and mentally healthy?

By Margie Patlak
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

THREE-YEAR-OLD Nick's response to his new baby sister was to poke and prod her to the point of harm, even though his mother demanded he not do so.

Not only was his sister upset by his sadistic curiosity, but so was his mother, who didn't know the best way to stop it. Should she give him "time outs," spank him, or just ignore him when he attacked his sister? Each parenting book she consulted had a different answer, so did her friends.

There's nothing new about this discipline dilemma. Every parent confronts it in one form or another and "experts" in each decade, from grandmothers to psychiatrists, have had different ideas on how to rule the roost. What is new are a number of scientific studies that have objectively looked at which discipline strategy works the best.

For the most part, the results of this research indicate that parents who consistently set firm, fair and enforced limits foster the most well-adjusted, healthy, academically successful and drug-free teen. Children whose parents are excessively strict or extremely lenient, in contrast, score poorly on these measures.

The findings of these studies have implications, not only for harried parents, but for society as a whole. Some experts blame the excessive drug use and violence that pervades our current culture on poor discipline techniques used in the home.

To cavestrop on that parenting process, psychologist Diana Baumrind and her colleagues at the University of California-Berkeley went into the homes of nearly 150 predominantly white, middle-class families in the 1960s and videotaped interactions between the parents and their 3-year-old children. The parents were also questioned as to the type of discipline style they used.

From this information, the researchers turned up three main types of discipline strategies: authoritarian (do it because I say so), authoritative (do it for this reason) and permissive (do whatever you want).

If a child throws a temper tantrum because he wants a candy bar, for example, an authoritarian parent would deny him the candy bar without explanation. An authoritative parent, in contrast, would also probably not give the child the candy bar, but would explain that he

couldn't have it because, for example, it was bad for his teeth. Or she might bargain with the child (You can have it after you finish your dinner). A permissive parent would simply let the child have the candy bar to avoid confrontation.

Not surprisingly, the three types of parenting styles molded three dramatically different types of kids, the researchers found when they returned 12 years later. They gave these teen-agers a battery of tests to assess their emotional health and maturity, social skills, scholastic abilities, and sexual and drug use practices.

They discovered that the children of permissive parents were the worst off. These immature youths had a hard time getting along with peers as well as getting up the muster to do their school work. They tended to be promiscuous and showed the heaviest drug use.

The excessively strict style of authoritarian parents also tended to backfire by the time their children reached adolescence. These youngsters were also immature, showed poor self-esteem and weren't motivated to do well in school.

Many, especially the girls, were obviously unhappy, anti-social and problem-ridden. These children scored the poorest on verbal and math achievement tests.

Although the teens of authoritarian parents had some of the lowest levels of drug or alcohol use, their substance use was about the same as children from authoritative parents. These youths were outstandingly well-adjusted, however, in comparison to those from more strict or lenient parents. They were more mature, happy, motivated, independent, socially adept, and showed little problem behavior and high self-esteem. Children of authoritative parents scored the highest on academic achievement tests.

Authoritative discipline comes out the winner, according to Baumrind, because the logical demands authoritative parents make of their children "don't come out of the blue but from a desire to foster the full development of their children. These parents take into account their child's point of view and negotiate with him, so they are less likely to rouse resistance in adolescents."

The well-explained and consistently enforced limits set by authoritative parents, in addition, teach the child how to think and make good decisions on his own. These children seem to develop a deeper attachment to standards than children of authoritarian parents who are just taught to obey.

"What seems to be true is that authoritative parenting never hurts and often helps," says psychologist Sanford Dornbusch of Stanford. In his large study of an ethnically and economically diverse group of families, authoritative discipline in the home fostered the best school ach-

ievement in high school students.

"It's nice to know that the same ideas on how parents should behave toward their kids seem to have similar meanings across all sexes, ethnic groups, ages and social classes," he says. "It's a relatively simple package."

What hurt kids the most, he found, was an inconsistent discipline strategy. "If the parents are so changeable that the same behavior one day is smiled on and the next day produces a violent outburst," he says, "the child doesn't know what to expect and eventually does whatever he feels like."

Psychologist Gerald Patterson, of the Oregon Social Learning Center in Eugene, found that delinquent kids are more likely to have parents who discipline them inconsistently or use threats of punishment that are either not followed through on, or followed through too harshly.

But although day-to-day inconsistency in discipline can hamper a child's development, it's never too late for parents to switch, on a more permanent basis, from one discipline style to another. Parents who graduated from Patterson's discipline training groups, for example, had adolescents with fewer run-ins with the law than those not treated.

Authoritative parenting requires more effort than the traditional do-as-I-say discipline, however. Parents have to step back from their own personal anger over a child's misbehavior in order to consider the child's point of view and to teach him how to do better in a situation.

Does the two-career family that now typifies the American way of life have the time and energy for authoritative parenting? "If I had my druthers," says Terry Rybold-Weigrod, a Milwaukee social worker, "I wouldn't want to discipline at all, because in the limited time I have together with my children, I want us to enjoy each other."

But Rybold-Weigrod does discipline her children authoritatively and so do most working moms, according to a study by Ellen Greenberger of the University of California-Irvine. She discovered that the authoritative style of parenting was more common than others among mothers who were highly committed to both work and parenting. She found little evidence that a parent's investment in work occurs at the expense of her investment in her children.

Although no one has assessed the long-term ramifications of spanking, other studies show that it's often not necessary. Among the tactics available for immediate discipline a "time-out," in which a child is sent to his room or some other designated spot for a few minutes, is the behavior tool of choice among most psychologists



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