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8 Biggest Discipline Mistakes And How to Fix Them



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One of the biggest parenting myths of all time is that our discipline tactics will instantly change our kids. In reality, many of the tactics we use either escalate the bad behaviour—the children feel you're unfair and rebel even more—or teach them to avoid getting caught by (gulp) lying and denying.

To make sure your discipline strategies are having a positive impact on your kids, here's how to avoid the most common pitfalls.

Mistake: Screaming Your Head Off

Each time you ask your son to hang up his backpack and he doesn't, your anger mounts. Until out of nowhere, you morph into Mommy-gone-mad and your poor kid bursts into tears.

Anger is an emotion that surfaces when you feel helpless. It's not a discipline tool—you don't teach your kids by frightening them.

In fact, when your child is scared, he likes you less and is actually less inclined to please or impress you. On the contrary, he just may resent you and act out more, or even lie to escape your wrath.

Fix: Take a Time Out

When you yell, your own inner child is having a temper tantrum, and you are teaching your kids to yell when they feel frustrated.

So when your child starts shouting that he won't clean his room—never, *ever!*—don't unleash your fury. Tell him you don't want to lose your cool, so you'll be back in a few minutes. Then find a private place to control your temper—bedroom, bathroom, wherever. If you need to vent, you can even turn on the vacuum to drown out sound.

By disconnecting from the power struggle, you not only give yourself space to calm down and consider your next move, but you also leave your child with space to calm down and get to work.

Mistake: Escalating Punishments

The first threat fell flat? Well, you'll teach those screaming banshees by upping the ante: "No dessert after supper!" you yell. And when that doesn't work: "Stop now or it's early to bed!" Before you know it, you've made a list of threats you can't possibly make good on, teaching your kids that your word means nothing. And to make matters worse, they're still screaming.

When your kids don't listen, it's tempting to try to make them hear you by threatening one punishment after another, but all you're doing is setting yourself up for a battle of wills—one that you'll most likely lose.

Fix: Choose a Consequence and Stick to it

You need only one carefully considered consequence to teach your kids their behaviour won't be tolerated. But you have to make that consequence something you are ready, willing and able to follow through on—even if it's the last thing you want to do. Consider your threat before you make it or you'll be thinking: "Please don't test me!"

Cont'd...



WHAT'S INSIDE...

MINDLESS EATING	4
NEW ASSOCIATE	5



Mistake: Giving Reactive Punishments

Bedtime means your child flips his lid—every night. He’s screaming that he’s hungry or begging for a story. But guess what? You’re beat. It’s lights out *now*, you say, or else it’s not TV tomorrow, a threat that only makes him wail harder.

When you’re at your wits’ end, taking away privileges seems like the only way to snap your child to his senses. But when he’s upset, that’s not a teaching moment. In fact, punishing an out of control child typically intensifies the tantrum.

Fix: Head off the Problem

Instead of punishing your child for his behaviour, you may be able to avoid it by planning ahead. Since tantrums tend to spike around mealtime or bedtime, a full tummy and solid sleep schedule work wonders. And once you figure out the trigger, you may need to replan the bedtime schedule—give him that apple earlier or brush his teeth before reading the book.

You should also take advantage of quiet “teaching” moments, when your child is happily colouring, say, to explain appropriate ways to ask for what he needs. He may be more receptive to the idea that getting what he wants doesn’t require screaming for it.

Transition times (“Get your shoes on; we’re going”) are particularly hard for kids who may be lost in their own world when we expect them to spring into action. If you give your child a 10 minute, then 5 minute warning, he won’t experience that jolt when you announce it’s time to move *right now*.

Mistake: Name Calling

No matter what you say, your child keeps leaving her dishes on the counter for you to clean. What are you, her slave? Let’s face it: She’s being rude, inconsiderate and just plain lazy. So you tell her that. But instead of carrying her plate to the sink, she bursts into tears.

Even if the label fits, don’t use it. Criticism, even if it describes her actions, sinks into her subconscious and affects how she sees herself. You may have said that her behaviour was mean, but all your child will hear is that she is mean and, even worse, that you believe that she is mean. And the fact is, tearing down her self-esteem will not help to teach her to be more responsible.

Fix: Target the Good Stuff

Swap those critical labels for positive words that tell her exactly what you want her to do. Choose a word that is opposite to how she is acting. For instance, if she’s careless, suggest she be careful. Noisy? Ask her to play quietly. Bossy? Suggest taking turns.

Even though you’re using these positive words in a disciplinary context, you child is internalizing them and hopefully will grow up applying them to herself. Short term, rather than being tortured by a barrage of criticism, she has a clear script for what to do right.

Mistake: Playing the Super Nag

After two hours as stove slave, you call out to your children, “Supper’s ready!” (*no answer*). “Guys! Supper!” (*silence*) Now you’re flying upstairs in a rage: “*did you hear me? Supper! Supper!! Supper!!!*”

Your children’s ears are perfectly fine, but your constant reminders have actually taught them that they can ignore you—at least for a while. They have learned that you will nag louder and louder until the decibels become so high, they really have no choice but to answer.

Fix: Ask Once and Move On

As difficult as it is, give your children clear instructions only once, and be prepared for that same old selective deafness. After all, they’re used to six reminders. But if you bite your tongue, they just may learn from the logical consequence of their lateness.

When they finally do make an appearance, they may find their dinner cold. She suggests telling them it wasn’t cold 10 minutes ago when you called them, and leaving them with the job of warming it up. Chances are tomorrow night they’ll hear those plates touch the table.

Mistake: Reacting Like an Automaton

Every morning, it’s the same old drama. Your daughter finishes breakfast, but when it’s time to get dressed, she starts whining that she wants to watch TV instead of going to school. It’s like a script she seems to have memorized. But consider this. Because you have a part in this drama too, she knows exactly how you’ll react: the same way you always do. Whether that’s by running to get her clothes, threatening her with no TV or launching into a full out screaming match, bring it on. She’s good and ready.

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Fix: Do the Unexpected

To derail a conflict headed for disaster, you should sometimes surprise your child with a “distraction action”. Instead of launching into the same old fight, do something unexpected that makes the moment fun instead of frustrating.

Just when you’re looking up to the sky in exasperation, suggest something like “Let’s see how fast we can run up the stairs while holding hands!” Or ask, “Before getting dressed, how loudly and then how quietly can we say I love you to each other?”

With the anger deflated and a renewed feeling of closeness between you and your child, the drama is likely behind you.

Mistake: Playing Good Cop/Bad Cop

When your son comes home with yet another D on his math test, you’ve had it. No PlayStation this weekend, you decree.

He is still in his room sulking, when his dad comes home and asks him what’s wrong. Now, after commiserating for an hour, they both agree that you overreacted. Hey, wait a minute! How did you end up in the doghouse when he was the one who failed to study?

Fix: Stay Onside With Your Spouse

It’s perfectly normal for parents to have different discipline styles and opinions. If your spouse had been home, maybe he would have simply reduced PlayStation time, rather than banning it outright. But contradicting each other just teaches your child that he can get out of jail by hiring one of you as lawyer.

Instead, talk to your child about the basic family rules and regulations, and let him know that you support each other when enforcing them. Otherwise, your child will try to negotiate on

every issue, from treats to curfew, just by pitting you against each other, sitting back and watching the fireworks.

Mistake: Refereeing Every Fight

The sobbing scream, “Moooo! He hit me!!” gets you every time. You’re off the computer in no time flat, racing to one child with arms wide, about to banish the other to his room.

Chances are, though, no one needs an ambulance. In fact, your kids have probably been duking it out for 10 minutes, and will figure it out in another 10 if you stay out of the fray.

Involving yourself in sibling fights just perpetuates them. Besides rewarding your kids with your undivided attention, you are robbing them of the valuable opportunity to learn to negotiate through conflict.

Fix: Teach Tools to Work it Out

At a quiet time, explain that when it comes to fighting, people have a choice. Teach your child that she can tell her sibling she does not choose to fight and would rather work out a solution. And if the fighting escalates to the point where your child feels in physical danger, she should move to a safe place, like her bedroom.

As for you, the next time your child tattles, ask what she’s going to do about it, then encourage her to communicate her feelings and try to work it out. Perhaps she can suggest she gets the Nintendo for 15 minutes, then it’s her brother’s turn. The fact is without you in the audience, you can bet they’ll find a solution themselves.

And don’t forget to notice when they do. There’s nothing more rewarding than a little praise from Mom or Dad for a job well done.



Mindless Eating

We've all heard it—"Eat when you're hungry; stop when you're full" - sounds pretty simple and should be easy, right? Wrong! Research shows that there are many cues, most of them having nothing to do with hunger, that determine how much and why we eat. For example, did you know you adjust your intake to match your dining companion?

What is Mindless Eating?

At the bottom of a bag of chips or a bucket of popcorn did you ever realize that you don't remember eating it—or you stopped enjoying it halfway through but kept eating? This is mindless eating: when external cues (e.g. size of the container), rather than internal cues (e.g. hunger, enjoyment), influence how much we eat. For example:

- ◆ We pour more liquid into a short, wide glass than a tall, skinny one.
- ◆ We eat 20% more food when serving containers are brought to the table.
- ◆ People eating with others eat 30—35% more than when eating alone.
- ◆ Having a snack within arm's reach doubles how much we eat.
- ◆ We put 25% more food on bigger plates.
- ◆ We eat 40% more food while watching TV.
- ◆ We eat more of a snack, even one we don't like, if it's labeled "low fat" because we believe it's "health conscious".
- ◆ When there is more variety to choose from, we eat more (e.g. people eat more at buffets).

How To Curb Mindless Eating

There are a number of small changes we can make to take control and eat mindfully. Try starting with 3 changes and add more as you succeed.

- ◆ Create a **stopping point**—Don't eat directly from the package, instead put some in a bowl or into smaller bags.
- ◆ Use **food trade-offs**—"I can have wine with dinner if I go to the gym."
- ◆ Have **food policies**—"I'll never eat at my desk, only at the table."



- ◆ **Think 20%** - more or less. Dish out 20% less pasta and 20% more veggies than you normally eat.
- ◆ **De-convenience tempting foods**—put them in the back of the cupboard, bottom of the freezer and out of arm's reach.
- ◆ **Out of sight, out of mind**—Wrap tempting food in foil; don't bring many "treats" into the house; get rid of the candy dish on your desk.
- ◆ **Downsize dishes**—Use smaller plates and bowls and taller, skinnier glasses.
- ◆ Beware of the **"health halo"**: don't reward yourself by adding high-calorie extras when you eat healthy (e.g. a cookie with your sub or extra sauces).
- ◆ Make **Restaurant-rules**—Sit next to the person you think will be the slowest eater and be the last to start eating. If ordering dessert—share it!
- ◆ Serve high calorie foods in the kitchen and vegetables on the table.
- ◆ Before you take a bite, **rate your hunger** from 1 to 10 (1 being extremely famished; 10 being that 'post Christmas dinner' feeling). Eat when you're at a 2 or 3 and stop when you're at a 7 or 8.
- ◆ Avoid multi tasking and distractions while eating (watching TV, driving, working).

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New Associate



**Please join
FAC in wel-
coming our
newest associ-
ate, Dr. Susan
Clark**

Dr. Susan Clark is a Registered Provisional Psychologist (2008), who will reach full registration in 2009. She is a member of the College of Alberta Psychologists, the Psychologists Association of Alberta, the American Psychological Association, the Association for Conflict Resolution, and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.

During Dr. Clark's clinical internship she completed over 3200 clinical hours providing individual and group psychotherapy, as well as comprehensive assessments using Evidenced-Based Practices for Child Protective Services in San Diego, California. Dr. Clark has a wealth of clinical experience working with children and families who have endured severe trauma and abuse. She also provided psychological services and consultation for children and adoles-

cents required to testify against their abusers in criminal and civil hearings. Additionally, Dr. Clark provided intensive sex offending and substance abuse treatment for juvenile and adult sexual offenders.

Dr. Clark's interest in high conflict divorcing families has led her to further her training within the practice of high conflict mediation. She participated in the renowned Legal Education Society of Alberta (LESA), mediation training program. Dr. Clark will be conducting a variety of assessments within the civil forensic arena. She has attended internationally renowned conferences associated with Forensic Interviewing and Child Sexual Exploitation.

Dr. Clark brings to Fong Ailon Canniff her wide range of experience working with young children, adolescents, adults, and families. Her special interest is in custody and access, risk assessment, trauma (PTSD), depression, anxiety, crisis intervention, and addiction issues. As an assessor, Dr. Clark has extensive experience in psycho-diagnostic impressions, risk assessment, and believes in facilitating growth through individualized treatment plans.

Dr. Clark has commenced her private practice with Fong Ailon Canniff and is accepting new clients and referrals.

SUGGESTIONS/COMMENTS?

Do you have any suggestions for future articles, or just a comment regarding this newsletter?

We welcome your feedback. Please contact Wanda Mueller at 403-266-2017 or wmueller@worldpsych.ca