

DUCKLOW'S

3 QUESTION DISCIPLINE OR PARENTING IN 20 MINUTES

I tell parents of young children that it takes about 20 minutes to discipline a child. I don't usually tell them it takes lots of 20 minutes-es to parent a child over their childhood.

Discipline comes from the root word "disciple," as in mentor or leader in a pathway to a goal. To mentor is to leave an impression on a child's life. For parents or leaders to live an impressive life in front of a child is one way of discipling and surely the best.

Another way of impressing oneself upon a child – and not effective at all – is to coerce or press something into the softness of a child's brain and emotions. This is coercion. It is an attempt to make a cookie-cutter person. These coerced impressions are not very impressive, if you get my drift. Kids tend to resent them pretty quickly.

In worst-case coercive parenting, most fathers and mothers leave the impression of parental frustration, limbic and uncontrolled fear, a list of oughts-shoulds-musts, and random consequences that are irrational to the child's thinking. We flood the child with upsetting emotions and warnings he can in no way process. She shuts down and tries to appease the much older and bulkier parent.

And this is discipline? What path is this for a child? What direction does this lead?

So if parenting takes 20 minutes, how do you do it?

Step one: you sit down and calm yourself. Rest for a few minutes. Breathe slowly and smile. Smiling is as good as breathing.

Step two: you call your lovely child into the hospitality of your calmness. Close the door. Always discipline in private. Smile some more and keep breathing.

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Step three: while still calm, you ask your child to stand between your knees (you are sitting aren't you) as you look at him / her face-to-face. Smile gently, touch gently and be gentle to yourself and your child.

Step four: you place a hand very lightly (underlined) on the smallness of your child's back. I call this a "spidery touch" as it sensitizes the nerves running down the child's spine and activates her or his attention.

This structure is effective for the child to focus and think. It is also effective for the parent to focus and think. Parent and child teaming up to focus and think is what discipline is.

And you ask 3 questions to the little person, questions she can answer.

- Question 1: "What are you doing?"
- Question 2: "What should you be doing?"
- Question 3: "Would you like me to help you succeed?"

That's it. 20 minutes of respectful listening. The first of a lot of 20 minutes-es of listening. Now here is the breakdown of the questions.

"What are you doing?"

"What are you doing?" is a great question designed to stimulate the child's thinking brain. You are not asking for rote recitation, apology or a reasonable defense. You are attempting to "cathect" (stimulate) the child's cerebral cortex or thinking brain. You are asking for memory and reflection. Thinking is a good idea in discipline and any kind of parenting.

"What should you be doing?"

"What should you be doing?" is to energize the child's conscience. You would be surprised how early a conscience is formed in a child. They are often willing to tell you how the world should work if he were King. And they often know what they should be doing if they were thinking. So you ask. And the conscience hears the "should" and she should respond!

"Would you like me to help you succeed?"

"Would you like me to help you succeed?" is the behavioral question. Now you have moved from thinking to opinionating to doing. These are the steps of change that are

easily accessible to a child. They feel the flow of it. And here you offer your partnership. Often kids will respond, “No I can do it myself” but follow along and applaud their best efforts at change.

Here is an example of how to discipline a future hockey great.

Sean who is 6 years old and thinks that he is the next Sidney Crosby, boards his 3-year old brother into the kitchen table as he whacks his baby sister into the goal between the cocker spaniel and the garbage can. Everybody is crying and Sean is confused -- he just scored an impossible goal after all. Mother comes in and is ready to lock him in the penalty box for 2 hours minimum. First she checks for tissue damage on the little ones (there is none), sticks grapes into their crying mouths, and asks Sean to meet her in her bedroom in a few minutes. (“Oops,” he thinks.)

Once in the bedroom with Mom sitting calmly, in walks Sean with 378 explanations and blames her for not giving him grapes. “Its unfair,” he complains. And mother avoids saying, “life is unfair” as her mother said to her and asks, “what are you doing?” and she is amazed how kind she is and how wonderful it is to have a plan. After she pats herself on the back, psychologically speaking, she hears Sean confess to starting the Syrian war. Some kids just over-confess when others admit nothing, at least right away. And she asks, “What were YOU doing?” (note emphasis). He explains that he had a bad day at school with no one to play with, and the mother, thrilled with herself now, asks “What were you DOING” (note emphasis). Finally Sean confesses to getting a pass from Zdeno Chara (confusing hockey teams) and shooting his sister off the dog’s head.

That’s not too bad a confession really. He is telling you his hoped-for, dream-like life and trusting you into this inner world. So you ask, “what SHOULD you be doing?” (note emphasis again). Now here comes the switch. He has to think about his behavior and how it affects others. This is “pro-social behavior” or conscience. Typically little Sean will say the opposite of what he has done in a question format, as in “not bump by brother into the table?” So you say again, “What should you be doing?” and he might say “apologize to everyone in the house” and you ask, “anything else?” You might as well exploit this generosity at this point as he might volunteer to make his bed, set the table, and be perfect for the rest of his life. You ignore the last bit because you are only working on behavior change and not promises.

Maybe he says, “play Lego with my brother?” and you say, “great, would you like me to help you?” and he says, “I can do it myself” which he does. A few minutes later you come by and offer him some grapes and say “thanks for doing successful things.”

That’s it. Discipline in 20 minutes.

Comments about all this.

- Notice that we have not asked the feelings questions or the why questions that all parenting experts want you to discern. The focus here is on discipline or change not on motivation or explanation. It is hard to resist asking “how were you feeling when you swore at your Mommy” but ignore this impulse. It is a rabbit trail.
- The child’s confession will not satisfy your need for justice; e.g., your moral calculus. Relax a bit. We are teaching a child to think and how to behave for the common good. This is not a court and not particularly obsessive. You start small. Think of the cocker spaniel and his confusion.
- The hand on the small of the back can feel upsetting to some kids and comforting to others. Be very gentle and if the child cannot tolerate any touch, just place the hand slightly away from his shirt so that he knows it is there but can’t feel it.
- I tell parents to never discipline standing up – you are just too tall for a child. And this results in compliance, not thoughtful change.
- Note: I am big on non-spanking. I am big on exuberant affirmation about thinking and decision-making. If you are a spanker, warner, threaten-er, then stop. Change your behavior. Repent!
- “Some kids just over-confess when others admit nothing, at least right away.” What about when kids don’t confess? Well, after 20 minutes, you make an appointment to continue the discussion, at your convenience. Sometimes kids will spontaneously confess at this point or it may take a few more 20 minutes-es to help the change process.
- You are in charge of the process. Kids will adapt to your leadership. This plan helps you to know where you are going and it is not where your child wants to lead you.
- You might say, “You haven’t met my kid!” and I probably have. I have met him when he is 25 and 45 and out of control. I have also met him when he was 15 and learning to control himself.
- Be consistent which means do your best 70% of the time. You can’t be perfect but you can design a great template for choosing how to parent well and how your kids can live their lives well.
- Note what I said above. “This structure is effective for the child to focus and think. It is also effective for the parent to focus and think. Parent and child teaming up to focus and think is what discipline is.” I am not sure who this template is best for; the parent or the child? The parent needs a pattern of discipleship and the child needs a reasonable strategy within which he can grow into.

- Repentance means to change behavior (see above). This a repentance strategy, it is how to change behavior. Parents: change your own behavior.

Think about this behavior change template for a minute and how it focuses on thinking-opinionating-deciding. Don't you wish someone taught you this stuff before you were 14 and in the backseat of an 18-year old's oily VW? Did anyone guide you on how to grow up? Did you copy an impressive person who believed in you? Did you ever take a course on how to make right choices? I bet that mostly you were shouted at, dismissed, overly succored (as in smothered so that you had no identity), consequent-ed to death, terrified in times out. That's discipline?

How about a reasonable conversation? How about clear and simple where a child can figure out what she needs to do to get along in the world?

Think about it. Take 20 minutes and think about it.