

A LINE ON LIFE

4/4/99

Guidelines for Discipline *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

April 4-10 is **The Week of the Young Child** in Yuma. Its theme is "*Early years are learning years — make them count.*" To celebrate this week, I will discuss various types of discipline and their effects. Parents tend to use one or more of the following methods to discipline their children — power assertion, withdrawal of love, and or management techniques. Each of these methods can control behavior, but their side effects differ greatly.

Power assertion emphasizes physical punishment or a show of force, like taking away toys or privileges. Especially if severe physical punishment is used, children are likely to develop fear and hatred of parents and be relatively unable to demonstrate affection or be spontaneous. Severely punished children also tend to be rebellious and aggressive.

Withdrawal of love involves withholding signs of affection, not speaking to the child, threatening to leave, or acting as if the child is temporarily unlovable. These children are often described as unusually "*good*" or as "*model*" children. On the other hand, they are frequently anxious and insecure, depending on adults for approval.

Management techniques combine praise, recognition and approval with rules and reasoning. However, it needs to be adjusted to the children's level of understanding. Younger children often can't make the connection between the reasons for rules and their own conduct. Even with this problem, this method is best for developing self-esteem.

Self-esteem — viewing yourself as a *worthwhile person* — is needed for emotional health. The first two methods produce low self-esteem. In contrast, management techniques — with consistent discipline and high parental involvement and concern for the child -- foster high self-esteem.

Effective parents use all three methods of discipline at one time or another. However, power assertion and withdrawal of love should be used with caution. Here are some guidelines in using them more effectively.

Express disapproval of the deed rather than the child. Indicate that you think the behavior was bad, rather than labeling the child as bad. Labeling the child as "*bad*" might cause the child to follow a disturbing role created by that labeling.

Tell them specifically what behavior is being punished. "*Don't do that!*" is not adequate. As children can understand, explain *why* you are setting limits on their behavior.

Physical punishment should not be harsh or injure the child. If you are very angry, wait until you cool off before punishing the child. Rather than being physical, punishment can be temporary loss of privileges. Whenever possible, the punishment needs to be related to the misdeed. If your child is using a tricycle carelessly, lock it up for a day or two, rather than confining your child to his/her room.

Except when you are so angry that you may harm the child, punishment is most effective when it is given *immediately* after the undesired behavior. This is especially true for younger children. The greater the separation between the undesired act and the punishment, the less likely that the punishment is going to be connected to the behavior. (Unfortunately, that is a problem with our legal system. The punishment is so remote from the criminal act; it is usually not connected with the crime. The punishment is more likely to be interpreted as, "*Don't get caught*," or "*Hire a better lawyer*.")

Physical punishment like spanking is not particularly effective for children under 2 years of age. It is more likely that the child will only be confused and frightened. Up to that age, scolding and stern looks are effective. After the age of 5, the effectiveness of physical punishment is reduced again. Then it is more likely to breed resentment.

Many psychologists believe that children should never be physically punished. However, if you do use that method, save it for only situations in which there is an immediate danger to the child, like running into the street.

It is more effective to reward children for being good rather than punishing them for their misdeeds. Rewarding good behavior can be as simple as a pat on the shoulder and saying, "*You did a good job*." In contrast, punishment only indicates what *not* to do. It does not necessarily encourage desired behavior. As an example, one time I caught my son playing in the road. I yelled, "*Don't run in the road!*" Scared but obedient, he stood still in the traffic. I hadn't told him what to do — to "*get out of the road*."

***Rewarding your children for desired behavior
is more effective than punishing bad behavior.***

During **The Week of the Young Child** in Yuma, parents can gain information to help them raise their children. On Saturday, April 10, 9 A.M.- 1 P.M., activities will be held

on the lawn of the Yuma Library (Third Avenue between Third and Fourth Street). Various agencies dealing with children will be there to answer your questions.

While parents gain much-needed information, "*hands-on*" activities will be provided for the children. Bring your children and a picnic lunch to enjoy the day. There is no charge. This event is sponsored by the Yuma County Association for the Education of Young Children, Arizona Western College and the Yuma County Library.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 158-159.