

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Effective Discipline

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In another article, we discussed one aspect of parenting — **good communication**. This week we will continue by giving some suggestions on another aspect of parenting — **effective discipline**.

One of the lasting myths about parenthood is the belief that "*Love is all a parent has to give to a child.*" No psychologist would deny that love is essential for healthy development, but discipline is equally important. Parents with unmanageable, delinquent or unhappy children can honestly claim that they gave them lots of love. Yet when parents fail to provide guidelines for behavior, children become anti-social, aggressive and insecure.

This does not mean that the family needs to be turned into a military "*boot camp.*" Effective discipline can be quite permissive. We want to provide adequate parental discipline to socialize the child. However, it is also important to remember that rules and parental curbs on behavior are frustrating to children. The problem is to discipline without frustration or without destroying the bond of love and trust with the child.

The core of this approach is a special form of permissiveness. As Dr. Haim Ginott, a child psychologist, explains in his book, *Between Parent and Child* (1965):

*"The essence of permissiveness is the acceptance of children as persons who have a constitutional right to have all kinds of feelings and wishes.... Overpermissiveness is the allowing of undesirable acts. Permissiveness brings confidence and increasing capacity to express feelings and thoughts. Overpermissiveness brings anxiety and increasing demands for privileges that cannot be granted."*

This means that discipline should give children freedom to express their deepest feelings. This does not mean freedom to do entirely as one pleases. It means that the child has room to move about freely *within* well-defined limits. Of course, individual parents might choose limits that are more or less "*strict.*" This choice is less important than the consistency of parental standards. A more **consistent** type of discipline gives a child a sense of security and stability. Inconsistency makes the child's world seem unreliable and unpredictable.

Parents tend to discipline using one or more of the following three methods: power assertion, withdrawal of love, or child management. Power assertion refers to physical punishment or to a show of force in which the parents take away toys or privileges. As an alternative, some parents may temporarily withdraw love by refusing to speak to the

child, by threatening to leave, by rejecting the child or by otherwise acting as if the child were temporarily unlovable. Management techniques combine praise, recognition, approval, rules, reasoning and the like to encourage behavior. Each method controls a child's behavior, but their side effects differ considerably.

**Power-oriented methods** — particularly harsh or severe physical punishment — are associated with fear, hatred of parents, and a lack of spontaneity and warmth. Severely punished children also tend to be defiant, rebellious and aggressive.

**Withdrawal of love**, a mainly middle-class method of discipline, produces children who tend to be self-disciplined — "*model*" children or unusually "*good*." However, as a side effect, they are also frequently anxious, insecure and dependent on adults for approval.

**Management techniques** also have their limitations, needing to be adjusted to the child's level of understanding. In spite of this, management techniques receive a big plus in promoting a child's **self-esteem** — regarding oneself as a worthwhile person.

Most parents use each method of discipline at one time or another, but physical punishment and withdrawal of love should be used with caution. The following guidelines need to be observed:

1. Disapprove of the *act*, rather than disapprove of the child. Instead of saying, "You are bad," indicate that doing the act is bad.
2. Punishment should never be harsh or injurious to a child. Do *not* physically punish the child, while you are angry.
3. With anyone, punishment is most effective, when it is administered immediately after the undesired act. This is especially true for younger children.
4. Reserve physical punishment for situations that pose an immediate danger for the child, like running into the street.

After age five, *management techniques are the most effective form of discipline*. At all ages, it is helpful to keep in mind this comparison:

**Authoritarian parents** view children as having few rights but responsibilities similar to adults.

**Overly-permissive** parents view children as having few responsibilities but rights similar to adults.

**Effective parents** try to balance their own rights with those of their children.

If you are interested in gaining more information, you can consult Dr. Ginott's *Between Parent and Child* or take a course in parenting.

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\* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishers, 1983, pages 385-388.