

A LINE ON LIFE

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Love Is Not Enough *

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In raising children, love is necessary for healthy development. However, **discipline** – guiding children toward acceptable behavior – is just as important. There are many children who become unmanageable, delinquent, or very unhappy. Their parents often can honestly say that they gave them lots of love. Even so, if parents don't provide adequate guidelines for behavior, their children become antisocial, aggressive, and insecure.

One problem is **overly permissive parents** – they let themselves be exploited or controlled by their children. This can create lifelong patterns of selfish behavior in their children. They give their children many adult rights but few responsibilities.

At the other extreme are **authoritarian parents** – they rigidly enforce rules and demand strict obedience to their authority. In contrast to permissive parents, they want their children to assume adult responsibilities with few rights. The family environment resembles a "boot camp." When parents are faultfinding, harsh or authoritarian, their children are more likely to become self-absorbed, be more violent, and engage in substance abuse.

A more effective middle road is called **authoritative**, but don't confuse it with "authoritarian." Parents can be firm and consistent in their guidance, combining it with love and affection. Rights are balanced with responsibilities. Rather than being harsh and rigid, parents are firm and consistent. Within limits that expand as the child becomes more responsible, they guide their children to think and to make good decisions. These children are more likely to be competent, self-controlled, independent, assertive and questioning.

**Whether you are strict or lenient,
your discipline is more effective
if you are consistent.**

Children need to feel free enough to express their own ideas and feelings. However, that doesn't mean they can do whatever they want. If parents are **strict**, their children have relatively few choices they can make on their own. If parents are **lenient**, their children are allowed more freedom to make choices. However, being strict or lenient is not as important as **consistency** – providing stable rules of behavior. Consistency gives children a feeling of stability and security, making their world seem more predictable. Consistent parents say what they mean and mean what they say.



However, some parents are inconsistent. This makes the world seem less predictable and more fearful for their children. They often make threats or promises that they are unable or unwilling to carry out. To be more consistent, parents need to make only promises or threats that they are willing and able to keep. Here are some situations to avoid.

Don't threaten or promise and not follow through.

* You may tell your child, "If you don't eat your spinach, you can't have dessert." However, if you feel guilty, you may later offer him the dessert.

* If the child is misbehaving in the car, you may threaten, "*If you don't quit shouting, I'll stop the car and make you walk home.*" (I hope you won't fulfill that threat.)

* "*Look what you did to the flower bed. You can't ever ride your bike again.*" (The punishment is too extreme for the deed. After cooling down, you may realize this. Then you have to contradict yourself.)

* If you have told a child, "*No*," don't give in to nagging or throwing tantrums. For example, you may refuse to buy a toy, but later you may give in and buy it. This reinforces the nagging or tantrums, making them more likely to occur in the future.

- Except for changed circumstances, don't respond differently to the same misbehavior. One day you might punish the children for fighting, but the next, you might ignore the same behavior.

If you don't say what you mean the first time, children quickly learn to ignore your warnings. They learn how often you will threaten before you actually administer any punishment.

Rather than limiting yourself to specific promises, you can leave situations more open. You can limit promises to certain conditions – the children's conduct, the family financial situation, or other factors. As children grow more responsible, you can ask them what options they think are fair. (However, you need to really consider those options.)

Don't make rules that cannot be enforced. Don't tell them to do something, without following through to see if the children have completed the task. If they have not, apply the appropriate sanctions. If they have, at least praise them for a "*job well done.*" (Encouraging desirable behavior is always more effective than punishing undesirable conduct.)

Not only do you need to be consistent within yourself, there needs to be **consistency between parents**. Don't contradict rules your partner has set up for the children. This will lead you to undermine each other's efforts. When the child isn't around, you both need to discuss discipline and reach compromises. In this way, you can support each other in your discipline efforts.

Unpredictable discipline means that children cannot control the consequences of their own behavior. This leaves them feeling confused and angry. Inconsistency gives your children the message, "*Don't believe what I say, because I usually don't mean it.*" Is that the message you want to give them?

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 133, 158.