

"Practical, accessible, useful, and wise in the matters of real life..."
—Robert Fulghum

HOW TO
DISCIPLINE
YOUR
SIX *to* TWELVE
YEAR OLD...
WITHOUT LOSING
YOUR MIND



FERRY L. WYCKOFF, Ph.D., and BARBARA C. UNELL

Authors of Discipline Without Shouting or Spanking

How **ipline**

Your Six-to-

Twelve-Year-Old...

without losing your mind



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# Preface




All children present occasional discipline problems, no matter how understanding their parents are. Six-to-twelve-year-olds seem to have a different agenda from that of their parents as they experience the last stage of childhood and proceed through the half-child/half-adult world of adolescence, a stage that we call “the middle years” or “childolescence.” But parents can close the gap between themselves and their middle-years children by following the practical remedies offered in this book.

Our intent is to show parents how to react to the discipline problems of normal, healthy children in calm, consistent, and effective ways—without imposing harsh punishments. We want to turn parents into “disciplined parents” who can control themselves when their children are least in control. We designed this book to be a handy reference for parents, a sort of first-aid book for handling inappropriate behavior. It recognizes the need parents have for brevity; for immediacy; and for direct, practical answers to parenting questions. The book offers advice on how to prevent inappropriate behavior from occurring and how to deal with such behavior when it does occur. There are also many example case histories here designed to illustrate how the strategies outlined in this book are applied to real problems.

This book was written out of the combined professional and parental experience of the authors. We have served collectively as teacher of developmental and child psychology; editor of parenting publications; and therapist in a school, hospital, and private practice, in addition to raising a total of four children. Our own experiences are supplemented by those of many other parents, who have contributed to this book.



# Introduction



Some childhood authorities say that it is during infancy that the most care must be given to children's hearts and souls. Others are no less zealous in espousing the importance of toddlerhood.

This book deals with a forgotten stage of child development—the “childolescent” years, ages six through twelve. We contend that these are the “make it or break it” years when parents can have a critical impact on their children, helping them develop a positive spirit and a curious attitude about their expanding world.

Childolescents seem to combine the best of all childhood worlds. They are as innocent, loving, curious, inventive, and independent as they were in the preschool years. They are also as self-sufficient, logical, and skillful in talking and listening as many adolescents. This seemingly wonderful combination can be volatile at times, however, and can often lead to the most intense of conflicts with parents.

These children are also faced with many expectations—at school and at home—that they are often hard pressed to meet. When they see failure as imminent, they then go to war with this world that is, in their view, making excessive demands on them. This war manifests itself through the child's inappropriate behavior at home, at school, and in the community. What children need is not a return declaration of war from parents in the form of greater demands and punishments. They need parental nurturing in the form of unconditional love, guidance, and support.

Parents will have to make rules and set boundaries even as they allow middle-years children to grow up and away. These boundaries need to be flexible and grow as a child grows, and children need to understand the reasons for them. Middle-years children can understand the reasoning of parents in

making rules, even though they may not *like* the rules or the reasons. These children can also understand that there are consequences for following the rules and for breaking them. In fact, the best learning comes from making mistakes and accepting the consequences of doing so.

Still, childolescents often challenge the rules. Verbal challenging of this kind should not only be allowed, it should be encouraged. It is only through being allowed to state his position that a child can feel empowered and develop an understanding of his world and his role in it.

Therefore, in order to manage the childolescents' behavior in a nurturing context, their parents must think of themselves as teachers because at their best, middle-years children are learners. When parents take a teaching approach to the management of childolescents, then their children have the opportunity to learn what they need to know in order to get along in the world.


But to be able to teach children in a way that they can best learn, teaching parents must first learn to discipline themselves. This self-discipline involves using understanding; tolerance; empathy; and above all, self-control, in coping with their offspring's inappropriate behavior. Parents who develop the self-control needed to become teaching parents are the best models that their children can have as they themselves learn to cope with a world that sometimes seems overwhelming.

This self-control needed to be teaching parents starts with self-acceptance. Parents must accept who they are in order to have unconditional love and acceptance of their children. This is the kind of acceptance that doesn't tell children that they must be someone else in order to be acceptable to their parents.

## **SELF-TALK**

What a person says to herself—self-talk—governs her behavior. Therefore, when the parent of a child adolescent calms herself down in times of stress by using helpful self-talk, she is more likely to follow through with reasonable and responsible actions. For example, when a parent says to herself, “I can’t stand it when my child talks back!” then her level of tolerance for back talk will be greatly diminished. If, however, she says to herself, “I don’t like it when my child talks back, but I can survive it,” then not only will she be able to tolerate the back talk longer, but she will also be likely to plan adequate ways of changing this behavior. Self-talk, then, becomes a way of setting oneself up for success rather than failure.

# How to Use This Book



To use this book most efficiently, think of each *do* as a remedy for a certain behavior problem. Judge for yourself the seriousness of the problem and then begin within the mildest strategy first. That usually involves showing your child what to do and encouraging her to do it. If that doesn't work, keep trying each of the options offered until you find something that does work. A list of *don'ts* will alert you to some common traps parents fall into. Avoiding these actions will help prevent behavior problems from recurring or becoming more severe.

The remedies often include suggestions of specific things to say to your child. These words will feel more natural to some parents than to others. Change a word or two if the exact language doesn't seem to come comfortably from your mouth. Children are acutely aware of and sensitive to the feelings and subtle reactions of their parents. Make what you say and do believable to your child, and she will more readily accept your tactics.

We also urge you to study our "Developmental Milestones" chapter before trying the options listed in each chapter. By approaching behavior goals from a developmentally appropriate perspective, you will feel calmer and more confident as you "listen" to your child's behavior—the language of her feelings—instead of focusing stressfully only on her inappropriate behavior.

## WHAT IS DISCIPLINE?

Discipline is not a punishment system designed to break a child's spirit and individuality. It is a teaching system that leads to orderliness and self-control.

Authoritarian parenting—demanding blind obedience from children and ruling them with punishment—produces child automatons who are controlled by the parents. Giving children the skills they need to cope with life—allowing children to take risks and practice decision-making within set boundaries—produces children who are secure and self-controlled.

This book was written in the belief that building trust and communicating positive attitudes about life are integral parts of discipline. They help a child's spirit grow and thrive and prepare her for the forceful winds of adolescence which will soon face her.

In order for parents to discipline children in the ways described in this book, it is important that they maintain a sense of humor about the process of discipline. It is difficult to solve problems (and to see a child who creates problems as someone to love) when anger takes the place of humor.

Finally, this book illustrates the many ways that unconditional love can become the golden thread in the tapestry of your child's middle years, strengthening her sense of herself as a unique and valued human being.

# The Do's and Don'ts of Disciplined Parenting



Over the past twenty-five years, behavioral researchers have discovered how children can most effectively be taught the skills they need in order to deal with the world. One simple, overriding fact has emerged: Children must be separated from their behavior. If a child shuns doing chores, calling him “lazy” won’t change his behavior. Its only effect may be to contribute to an unhealthy self-image, and it may possibly become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Parents can show their children that they love them even if they don’t love the particular way that they are behaving.

When children behave inappropriately, it is probably because they have not yet learned a rule or how to follow it, or because they did not know a more appropriate way to deal with an experience.

In today’s highly competitive age, problem behavior is also often seen in overstressed children who are angry and defiant because of the inappropriate expectations placed on them. If you are faced with sudden, dramatic behavior changes in your child, consider as many potential problem sources as possible—stress, depression, peer pressure, abuse, fear of failure—before assuming that your child simply does not know a

certain behavior rule that you, therefore, need to teach him. In short, keep in mind that not all behavior problems can be attributed to normal developmental upheavals or the lack of knowledge about how to cope with the world.

Moreover, when problem behavior occurs, don't rely solely on what your child says or does; tap all possible sources of information before taking action or before making a final decision about what action should be taken. Contact teachers and others in his school or neighborhood to see if the behavior is noted in all quarters. *Problem behaviors* resulting from emotional disturbances will pervade all environments in which the child has to function. On the other hand, *behavior problems*—those which may reflect the making of poor choices, the lack of knowledge about a rule, or the testing of limits—will generally be confined to one or two environments, like home or school.

Teaching children appropriate behavior goals—ways to deal with their world within certain confines (boundaries and limits) using unconditional love—is called “discipline” in this book. The following “Do’s and Don’ts” of disciplined parenting are based on the principles outlined above and are designed to change a child’s behavior rather than change a child himself.

**DECIDE THE SPECIFIC BEHAVIOR YOU WANT YOUR CHILD TO LEARN.** Focus on a concrete, rather than abstract, behavior (“cleaning a room,” rather than “being neat”). This tells your child what is wanted and centers the discipline on changing the child’s behavior, not the child himself.

**TELL YOUR CHILD EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT HIM TO DO AND SHOW HIM HOW TO DO IT.** When you establish a goal for your child—keeping his room clean, for example—give your child specific instructions on how to reach that goal. Say, “Please make your bed, put your dirty clothes in the hamper, put your

clean clothes in your drawer, and put your toys on the shelves where they belong." This also allows your child to save face if he does not know where to begin.

## **ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD'S MOVEMENT TOWARD THE GOAL.**

Rather than praising your child, praise his behavior. This builds his self-confidence and autonomy as he moves toward the behavior goal. Say, for example, "You made your bed so well this morning. Now, when your dirty clothes are off the floor and in the hamper, the room will be clean!" This praise is honest, focuses on what your child has accomplished, and guides him nicely toward the final steps he needs to complete in order to reach the goal. Moreover, it helps him feel good about his accomplishments and his ability to meet the final goal.

## **CONTINUE TO ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD AS LONG AS HE NEEDS HELP IN REACHING THE GOAL.**

By continuing to praise the steps your child is taking toward reaching the goal, you not only help learning to take place, you also remind your child that he is a competent person. In addition, praise continues to show the correct way of doing things, which keeps your child moving toward the learning goal.

## **AVOID POWER STRUGGLES WITH YOUR CHILD.**

Childolescents are old enough to discover the extent to which their world is out of their control. This realization results in varying degrees of frustration, which may frequently bloom into outbursts of anger over who's got the "power" in certain situations.

Though they see that it may not be possible, childolescents want to try to have the same power that they see their parents having. By using Grandma's Rule (See "Discipline Dictionary"), you allow your child to have a sense of autonomy and control—some decision-making power within the boundaries you have set.



**BE THERE.** Parents don't need to be with their child-olcs every minute of the day, but they do need to offer support, supervision, encouragement, and unconditional love in a warm atmosphere with clearly defined limits.

This emotional support is more important than physical proximity. Middle-years children look to their parents for guidance and authority. They also have the ability to ruminate, ponder, and think about the parental support they are getting, even when it is not concretely visible that their parents are giving it to them.

Just knowing that their parents are behind them—loving them no matter what their behavior—helps children grow to be giving, caring adults who are emotionally strong, compassionate, empathetic, and nurturing.

Parents must realize that they are the front line in the defense against their children's involvement in abusive behaviors, such as alcohol, drug, and tobacco (and other chemical) abuse, as well as other addictions. All the federally mandated programs, all the best ideas of curriculum specialists, all the expertise of drug/alcohol counselors have no chance of being successful at preventing substance abuse unless parents provide appropriate models at home and become actively involved in providing their children with the foundation of rules and structure within a caring, nurturing environment.

**DON'T BE A HISTORIAN.** Children usually know when they are doing something wrong, so reminding them afterward only serves to put the inappropriate behavior in front of them again. Tell children the goal that you want them to accomplish; avoid telling them what you don't want them to learn.

Instead of reminding your child that he shouldn't have been fighting with his brother, for example, leave the past fight to history and remind him to get along with his brother. That states the goal of "getting along" to your child and focuses you both on the goal, not on the inappropriate behavior.