

4/10: "If rewards and punishments just make things worse, what should parents do?" The question is perfectly reasonable yet very difficult to answer in a simple and satisfying way. That's true, first, because everything depends on how the question ends: What should parents do . . . to make kids obey? (If we're really looking for how to get mindless compliance, then we may need to rethink the goal rather than just searching for a better technique.) What should parents do to help their kids become generous and compassionate? Happy? More self-sufficient? Lifelong learners and readers? Each set of objectives will lead us to a somewhat different answer. Even for a single goal, moreover, it makes no sense to look for a recipe because so much depends on who the children—and their parents—are.

The absence of a step-by-step solution to parenting challenges can be terribly frustrating to people who believe that "practical" advice entails just such a solution. But we really ought to be skeptical about the advisers who do offer such solutions. To say "If your kid does x, you should do y," is to imply that it doesn't matter who you are, who your child is, or why your child is doing x. To that extent, they're being disrespectful both to you and to your child.

Besides, one-size-fits-all strategies usually just turn out to be ways of doing things to children—in other words, a variant of rewards ("positive reinforcement") or punishments ("consequences"). By contrast, there are countless "working with" approaches, and they need to be worked out in each family.

That doesn't mean, of course, that no help can be offered to parents. But what can be said to everyone—rather than just to you about how to help your child with this particular problem—will necessarily take the form of broadly conceived guidelines rather than specific instructions. Here are ten examples.

1. Reconsider your requests.

Sometimes when kids don't do what we tell them, the problem isn't with the kids but with what we're telling them to do.

2. Put the relationship first.

What matters more than any of the day-to-day details is the connection that we have—or don't have—with our children over the long haul—whether they trust us and know that we trust them.

3. Imagine how things look from your child's perspective.

Parents who regularly switch to the child's point of view are better informed, gentler, and likely to set an example of perspective-taking for their children (which is the cornerstone of moral development).

4. Be authentic.

Your child needs a human being—flawed, caring, and vulnerable—more than he or she needs someone pretending to be a crisply competent Perfect Parent.

5. Talk less, ask more.

Telling is better than yelling, and explaining is better than just telling, but sometimes eliciting (the child's feelings, ideas, and preferences) is even better than explaining.

6. "Attribute to children the best possible motive consistent with the facts."

Nel Noddings reminds us that kids will live up to, or down to, our expectations, so it's better to assume the best when we don't know for sure why they did what they did.

7. Try to say yes.

Don't function on autoparent and unnecessarily deny children the chance to do unusual things. People don't get better at coping with frustration as a result of having been deliberately frustrated when they were young.

8. Don't be rigid.

Predictability can be overdone; the apparent need for inflexible rules may vanish when we stop seeing a troubling behavior as an infraction that must be punished—and start seeing it as a problem to be solved (together).

9. Give kids more say about their lives.

Children learn to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. Our default response should be to let them choose—unless there's a compelling reason to deny them that opportunity.

10. Love them unconditionally.

Kids should know that we care for them just because of who they are, not because of what they do. Punishments (including time-outs) and rewards (including praise) may communicate that they have to earn our love—which is exactly the opposite of what children need, psychologically speaking.

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