

The ABC approach to positive discipline

The journey of parenting can be like a roller-coaster ride with many ups, downs and thrills along the way. For many parents, one of the most daunting and challenging tasks of raising a child is the implementation of discipline.

The term discipline is derived from the Latin word '*disciplinare*' which means 'to teach'. Teaching a child the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour involves a multi-faceted approach that requires empathy, patience, energy, creativity, and a bag of useful discipline techniques. In this article, I aim to share one of the techniques I have used over the years to help parents to feel more equipped and empowered to teach their children how to become responsible, empathetic and accountable individuals.

It is through testing and learning about boundaries in the home that children learn what socially acceptable behaviour is in the outside world. Emphasising the principles of cause and effect, praising good behaviour and actively working with your child by allowing them to choose a more favourable and acceptable way of behaving, are useful tools in your discipline tool box.

Research shows that children whose parents give them firm but loving discipline are generally more skilled socially and do better at school than children whose parents set too few limits (permissive parenting style) or too many limits (totalitarian parenting style). An 'authoritative' parenting style, also known as a democratic or balanced style of parenting facilitates positive parenting values. This style highlights the importance of 'emotional coaching' where both parents and children are encouraged to recognise and express their feelings appropriately at the same time as establishing firm and consistent boundaries. It aims to assist children to become more responsible by focusing on three aspects:

- helping children to understand their own emotions and the emotions of others;
- setting appropriate boundaries; and
- giving children choices and consequences for their actions within those boundaries.

When using a positive parenting approach, children are more inclined to acquire a sense of empathy for others, learn to take ownership of their actions and are able to develop a sense of self-mastery.

In my psychology practice, I work with a technique that I refer to as the ABC approach to positive discipline when working with parents. Many of these ideas are grounded in the work of Garry Landreth, a well-known child therapist in the USA.

I would like to share with you the three important components that form the foundation of this discipline approach.

- A. stands for ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of a child's feeling or wants
- B. stands for creating a BOUNDARY for the behaviour or action
- C. stands for CHOICE and CONSEQUENCES

Please see below how these three skills can be used together to assist parents to follow a positive parenting approach to discipline.

Please note: The same thread of examples have been used across the three steps.

A. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of child's feelings or wants

Examples of what a parent may say to acknowledge a child's feelings or desires:

- *I know you would like to watch more TV, you really love that TV show...*
- *You are so mad with your brother right now...*
- *You really don't want to share that toy, it just feels like the best toy right now...*
- *I can tell you don't want to leave the party right now...*
- *I can see you are really upset with your friend...*
- *I can see you are really angry with me...*

- Like adults, children have a fundamental need to feel heard and understood. Research explains that for a child to learn, they must feel that they are being accepted unconditionally and that they have the freedom to express their emotions openly. By identifying and naming the emotion or desire that a child is trying to show you, it tells the child, *'I accept you and understand you, although I do not accept the behaviour you are choosing to display'*. When a child feels heard, they are less likely to escalate their behaviour to get their message across and are likely to be more responsive to the next step.
- By naming the emotion, a child is learning to associate a physical feeling with an appropriate emotional term. This helps build their understanding of their own emotions and helps them to be more empathetic and perceptive to the feelings of others. It may also help build their expressive language repertoire. Going forward they may be able to put into words what it is that they are feeling without having to show you through their behaviour.
- This step is so crucial even in the heat of the moment. When a child is trying to communicate something to their parent (often through behaviour) and the parent goes straight to the disciplining, boundary-setting phase, the child may feel the need to continue with that behaviour to try to get their message across in order to feel understood.
- **By acknowledging a child's feelings or desires, the child gets the underlying message of *'I've been heard and understood'* and learns to trust their own emotions.**

B. Communicate the BOUNDARY. State the rule or tell the child what needs to be done.

Examples of what a parent may say to clearly communicate a limit to their child:

- *But TV time is over now...*
- *But your brother is not for hitting. Hitting is not okay in this home...*
- *But these toys are for everyone and we need to share them when we come to this place...*
- *But it is time to leave to go...*
- *But pulling her hair is not nice...*
- *But I am not for screaming at...*

- No matter what discipline model or parenting approach a parent may choose to use, boundary-setting will also need to play a role.

- We do this by establishing clear rules. Most parents want their children to progress through school, possibly attend some form of tertiary education, get a job, get married and lead a successful independent life. In order to do this, your child will need to respect the rules of society. Rules help maintain structure in every context in every culture in every country.
- Far from restricting children, rules actually give children a sense of security. Children, like adults, need to be able to predict what is going to happen to them and around them. This helps children feel good about themselves when they can predict what will happen next. This helps them to build a sense of self-mastery of their own world and their environment.
- Boundaries are created to provide a firm structure and this is generally built on only a few non-negotiable rules. These are generally related to personal safety and activities such as mealtime, bath time and bedtime. According to Dereck Jackson¹, a well-known educator and counsellor in South Africa, only a few non-negotiable rules are needed in a functional home. These include:
 - We, the parents, are in charge.
 - There is a time to go to bed at night and a time to get up in the morning.
 - There is a time to eat.
 - There is a time to tidy up after you have untidied.
 - There is a time to do your homework (once the child is at school).
 - There is a time to bath or shower.
 - You speak to your parents with respect.
- Body language and tone of voice are extremely important when establishing a boundary. Simple, assertive and direct statements in a calm yet firm voice are likely to be the most effective.

C. Provide at least one CHOICE and clearly state a CONSEQUENCE of action. Always offer a more favourable, positive alternative choice.

PART 1 Giving at least one CHOICE to redirect behaviour:

Examples of what a parent may say to provide a choice or alternative action for a child.

- *You can choose to turn the TV off yourself or you can choose for me to turn it off.*
- *You can go tell your brother that he made you very mad or you can go and have some 'chill down' time in your room.*
- *You can choose to stay here and share these toys or you choose to go home.*
- *You can choose to hold my hand and walk out with me or you can choose to walk out on your own.*
- *You can choose to tell Susie that she made you very sad or you can make a plan and go and find another friend to play with.*
- *You can choose to come and sit with me and tell me what made you so mad or you can go and sit in your room till you are ready.*

¹ Extract taken from his book, 'Parenting with Panache'. ISBN 0-620-28423-4

- The key is offering limited choices. So don't simply ask your child what she wants for lunch. Instead offer her a sandwich or a hotdog. Younger children can especially be overwhelmed when they have too many choices. Ideally it is best to limit choices to no more than two choices.
- Choices need to be age-appropriate to encourage cooperation. Be creative; you can also make some choices fun i.e. it's school time, do you want to hop to the car like a bunny or gallop to the car like a horse; it's time for your bath, do you want bubbles in your bath or no bubbles today?; It's supper time, do you want tomato sauce on the side or on top of your macaroni?; 'You need to get into your car seat, do you want to get in on your own or do you want mommy to help you?'. Choices such as these may distract your child from the power-struggle and allow them to feel a sense of personal control.
- Stay positive and be willing to assist your child in following through on their choice in a kind and (sometimes fun) manner. i.e. can mom hop with you to the car? can we sing together while you having a bath? can we play eye-spy together in the car? Some children benefit from a parent doing something with them while transitioning from a melt-down to a more cooperative frame of mind.
- When there is only one choice, you can still try to offer your child a 'choice'. For example, if your child doesn't want to wear a helmet while riding their bike, you can offer a choice of wearing the helmet or simply not riding their bike. In this way, your child may still feel a sense of control of their decision-making.
- Pick your battles.

PART 2 Presenting a CONSEQUENCE for an action:

- If the child refuses to choose, you choose for them. The child's refusal to choose is also a choice. Set the consequences. For example: if you choose not to choose (option A) or (option B), then you have chosen for me to pick the one that is most convenient for me.
- If after a more favourable choice has been provided, the child still chooses to continue with the unacceptable behaviour, it is necessary to state a consequence for continuing that behaviour. This teaches children that each action yields a result, positive or negative. This step helps the child learn that he/she is responsible for his/her own choices and behaviours and the outcomes associated with them.
- Experiencing the consequences of their choices is one of the most effective ways children learn self-discipline. Being able to think ahead about the positive or negative consequences of an action and choose accordingly is a skill we want our children to learn.

Examples of what a parent may say to state a consequence should the child choose to continue with an unacceptable behaviour.

- *Okay you are choosing for mommy to switch the TV off...*
- *If you choose to hit your brother again, you choose to go straight to your room for time-out...*
- *If you choose not to share this toy, you choose for us to go home right now...*
- *If you choose not to walk with me nicely out the party, you choose to leave your party box here.*

- *If you choose to pull Susie's hair again, you choose to go to time-out...*
- *If you choose to continue shouting at me, you choose to go to time out. Alternatively, a withdrawal of a privilege could be considered for older children i.e. If you choose to continue shouting at me, you choose no TV after supper time.*

What CONSEQUENCES are appropriate?

This will depend on a number of factors:

- the age of the child
 - the nature of the 'offence'
 - your belief system
- If you believe that giving a young child a smack is unacceptable, that is your right as a parent. You will then rule that option out of your consequences list.
 - Two other types of consequences that are often used:
 - Withholding privileges
 - Time-out

No matter what approach or parenting model you follow, positive reinforcement of good behaviour should be prioritised as a means of positive parenting. This means acknowledging and giving praise to a child when they choose to behave correctly and being cognisant that paying attention to negative behaviour could in fact increase an unfavourable behaviour.

Consistent, fair and developmentally appropriate forms of discipline are key for a child's development. The foundation of a family's approach to discipline must lie in mutual respect and focus on the child's overall development, rather than the incorrect behaviour.

Keep these factors in mind as you navigate through the wonder years of your child's development. With a strong sense of self-discipline, founded in the early years of life, your children will become independent adults, secure in the knowledge that their parents loved them enough to say no.