

The History of my Behavior Modification System that Promotes Healthy Self-Esteem

For as long as I can remember I've been fascinated with human behavior. Why do people act the way they do? Those curiosities lead me to a career in psychology and began my study of unconscious learning, what is taught and learned when we don't even know or remember that we've learned it. What one learns consciously or unconsciously directly affects their behavior and self-esteem for years, forever or until it is unlearned.

Throughout my 50+ years of experience I have seen with client after client, year after year, the damage done to children's self-esteem that was caused by inconsistent and harsh discipline. A good discipline system is *essential* to both modifying a child's behavior and promoting one's healthy self-esteem.

As the founder of a therapeutic community I had to develop a discipline system that modified behavior and promoted healthy self-esteem. It is a system focused on accountability while promoting self-esteem.

As a father, I used that successful system for raising my own children. It is the system that my children's mother and I followed through developmental stages and life's unexpected changes. It did not always run smoothly and there were adjustments made. Adjustments were made during family meetings so everyone was aware of the changes. We tried to always keep in mind to discipline with the focus of promoting healthy self-esteem.

Now, as we enjoy our grown children as adults and as parents to our grandchildren, I can honestly say it worked very well. I believe it will work well for you too.

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Objective:

To provide a behavior management process model that promotes healthy self-esteem.

Overview:

My discipline system has one purpose: To discipline with the focus of promoting healthy self-esteem. I am going to advise you on a process of conditioning and consequence that will build a child's self worth, self-esteem in the midst of discipline.

Basic Principles:

Mom and Dad make all decisions together.
 Love is unconditional and demonstrated even in the middle of discipline.
 Misbehavior is managed by teaching healing consequences set by the parents.
 Obedience is trained early on by conditioning without punishment.
 Parents set clear limits and allow maximum freedom within the limits.
 Always end an incident on a positive note.
 During any process teach conflict resolution skills.
 Parents never lose a power struggle – an occasional tie is not a loss.

What is the Process?

The first thing to do if you are initiating this system with young children is to have a family meeting to tell your children about the new system and explain. Encourage them to participate. Consider their input.

The Process:

Parents set the limits.

When a child behaves within the limits and exhibits behavior you want to see repeated you apply:

Positive Consequence

- Every day you acknowledge and reward the behavior you want repeated.
- Issue reinforcement with words as you as you give the positive consequence. Such as "Good boy/girl".

When a child exceeds the limits and exhibits behavior you want to correct you apply:

Negative Consequence

- Engage with your child and establish a rapport diffusing the situation. Allow time needed for you and your child to settle down.
- With goodwill and good communication identify what your child was thinking, feeling when they misbehaved.
- Create a healing teaching consequence.
- Execute the consequence.
- Give your child a reward, an "Atta boy", for accepting the consequence.

A good discipline system manages behavior and promotes healthy self-esteem by having clear limits with maximum freedom within those limits, and with fair and reasonable consequences.

Understanding Healthy Self-Esteem vs. Unhealthy Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is simply your feel good about you.

Healthy self-esteem is important because it helps kids cope with disappointments, mistakes, criticisms, and to accept their limitations. It helps kids try again, even if they fail at first. As a result, healthy self-esteem helps kids do better at school, at home, and with relationships.

When you have *healthy* self-esteem, you feel good about yourself and see yourself as deserving the respect of others.

You are:

- Assertive in expressing your needs and opinions.
- Confident in your ability to make decisions.
- Able to form secure and honest relationships.
- Realistic in your expectations and less critical of yourself and others.
- Not over sensitive to your sense of self and not easily wounded.
- Aware that approval of one's self is more important than the approval of others.

When you have *low* self-esteem, you put little value on your opinions and ideas.

You are:

- Passive in expressing your needs and opinions.
- Lacking in confidence in your ability to make correct decisions.
- At risk of accepting disrespectful and/or abusive relationships.
- Hyper-vigilant to rejection and overcritical of yourself and others.
- Hypersensitive and your sense of self are easily wounded.
- Prone to feeling sorry for yourself.

When you have *too high* self-esteem, your opinion of yourself is overblown, unrealistic, and you feel superior to others.

You are:

- Boastful and demanding in expressing your needs and opinions.
- Overconfident in your abilities and make reckless decisions.
- Self obsessed and righteous preventing you from successful relationships.
- Excessive in your need for praise and intolerant of criticism.
- At risk of narcissism - unfortunately seen as healthy self-esteem.

A person's self-esteem is the singular predictor of one's success in life.

Predictions can change. And so can one's self-esteem.

Because of this system you will be able to change your child's attitude, behavior and increase their self-esteem.

A good discipline system is the best predictor of healthy self-esteem.

Understanding Discipline vs Punishment

Parents find a great deal of controversy about the appropriate ways to discipline their children. Often confused about the right way to set limits and demand compliance.

The word discipline means to impart knowledge and skill – to teach. It is often equated with punishment and control. Of course there is behavior that needs to be punished. Punishment without teaching can produce obedience at the cost of damaging a child's self-esteem. Punishment without teaching isn't discipline, it's just a punishment. I use the term consequence to represent a punishment that is intended to teach acceptable behavior and is applied in a way that will not damage a child's self-esteem.

Effective discipline positively regulates behavior with appropriate rewards and reasonable consequences. Good behavior is regularly rewarded with words and actions. Consequences for misbehavior are issued with love and support and mutual respect is maintained. An effective discipline system instills acceptance and respect of parental authority.

Discipline that *positively regulates* behavior with rewards and appropriate consequences will promote a child's self-esteem.

Negative conduct such as humiliation (verbal abuse, shouting, and name-calling) and/or angry physical reactions (hitting, slapping, arm jerking) negatively punishes behavior and can potentially cause the child not to respect and trust the parent.

Discipline that *negatively punishes* behavior will not promote a child's self-esteem and can cause long lasting anxiety, depression, and defiance in a child.

A major obstacle to achieving your disciplinary goals is inconsistency. Inconsistency means rewarding behavior one time and punishing the same behavior the next time. It is punishing behavior one time and not punishing the same behavior the next time.

It can be particularly hard for parents to be equally consistent and disagreements about technique may occur. If discord and inconsistency continue for an extended period of time an ineffective discipline system will prevail. A child may feel insecure, unsafe if their home is chaotic with erratic and unpredictable responses to their behavior.

Inconsistency will not help a child respect their parents.
It threatens the success of any discipline system.
It potentially creates an unstable chaotic family environment.

Discipline teaches a child through a process of reinforcement and rewards how to behave, to continue to behave in a certain way, and when they do not to accept certain circumstances.

Discipline and Conditioning

Conditioning is the systemic process of issuing positive and negative consequences to manage behavior.

Conditioning is the behavioral process whereby a parent's positive response to a child's behavior becomes increasingly habitual as reinforcement, a reward for good behavior, good effort, and good choices. A parent's smile, tone of voice, demeanor, and mindfulness of their child's efforts are all positive responses. Rewards and reinforcements build healthy self-esteem.

Consequence itself is the conditioning factor. The issuance of fair and reasonable consequences intending to correct behavior and to teach appropriate behavior will help build a child's healthy self-esteem.

Positive Reinforcement - example

Your child walks into the kitchen while you're putting groceries away. They help you by grabbing a bag and handing to you without you asking. You smile and tell them thank you, you appreciate it when they are helpful. Later, you give them a treat out of the bag.

Fair and Reasonable Consequence - example

Your child gets an F on their report card.
 You reinforce that an F reflects their performance not their worth.
 You identify the problem (I use missing assignments for this example).
 You give them the choice of two fitting consequences: Until their grade improves they can have you check their homework daily or they can do the homework together with you.
 When the grade improves, you reward them – such as play a favorite game

Playing with your child is another opportunity to use conditioning. A game that I used often was one I called "The Obey Game". This game is good for young children, as young as 2 years old. It conditions children to obey and teaches them to pay attention, to listen - an issue many children have.

I start with a small treat that they want. I hold the treat in my hand and tell them:

I have a treat. If you want it you can earn it.
 If you obey 3 simple commands you will earn the treat.
 When I say "Go" I want you to touch the wall, touch the pillow, and touch my chair.
 I wait a few seconds before I say "Go".
 Then I trick them by saying "Now" instead of "Go"
 They predictably are so excited they go anyway.
 We play it again until they earn the treat by going when I say "Go" not "Now".
 They earn it when they pay attention to the right command.
 When they get the treat I reinforce their success with words.
 Good obeying. Good boy/girl.

(This is an excellent exercise for helping ADHD children learn to pay attention and be rewarded for it.)

***Increasing positive consequences
 decreases the need for negative consequences.***

Conditioning and Unconscious Learning

Just because a child doesn't remember doesn't mean things won't affect them. There are childhood traumas that children don't remember that badly affect them for their lifetime.

A baby at 6 weeks old already knows your intention when you are reaching for them. They've learned that when you move a certain way you are reaching for them and if you move just slightly different you are reaching beyond them. Before children start to remember, normally around 4 years old, they have already learned through your words, tone, actions, and demeanor. Your behavior matters greatly.

Unconscious learning, what we learned when we don't even know or remember that we learned it, can affect us for a lifetime - or until we unlearn it. Good or bad.

My youngest daughter, at four years old, was playing with her siblings in the room next to where her mother and I were playing cards. Just as I looked over at the kids, I saw her pick up a metal truck and throw it right at her brother's head. She looked at me and saw that I saw her. Without me saying a word she stood up, walked over to the timeout chair, and sat. We had not yet talked to her about, nor had she previously been in timeout.

A patient has given me permission to discuss his battle with anxiety and panic attacks. Often when he was alone and always when his wife left to do anything his anxiety went crazy and he had panic attacks. He told me, "I don't think it has anything to do with what happened when I was five." I asked him to tell me about what happened when he was five. His older brother was watching him while their parents went out. When he asked his brother where his parents went his brother, instructed by his parents not to say they were Christmas shopping, told him they ran away. My patient became very worried and frightened. He ran from the house to search the neighborhood and find his parents. Never finding his parents he returned home terribly upset. Eventually, his parents returned. No one, not his brother or his parents ever told him the truth. Once he discovered the truth his anxiety went away. He learned the original cause of his anxiety.

Conditioning can be intentional, unintentional, conscious, and unconscious.

Children are awesome learning machines. They are learning all the time and it isn't always what we want them to learn. Show them goodwill and good communication so they can talk to you about what they are learning and where they are learning it.

Conditioning is the foundation of an effective behavior modification discipline system that promotes healthy self-esteem.

How to Plan Your System

Planning for discipline is as important as planning for your child's childcare, their healthcare, or their education. Whether or not you have ever or never discussed discipline, disagree about it, or already have a system the plan to integrate a new discipline system starts with a discussion between the parents.

There is much to discuss. Take time to discuss your own past childhood experiences with parenting and discipline. How those experiences affected you. What you have seen or learned that worked or didn't work. Share with each other the challenges you may be experiencing, your parenting fears. Discuss specifically what is never, ever acceptable to you.

Hopefully you will agree on your discipline preferences. It is important to find a way to compromise where you can and ultimately agree. It is *imperative* that both parents agree on the discipline system and apply it with unity, mutual support, and consistency.

Be specific about what is most important to you for your child. Define your goals and learn what is needed for your child to gain the skills to teach them. Use your goals to define your purpose, your belief statement. This is your core belief that will determine how decisions will be measured.

Identify your need, define your purpose.

My core purpose is: To discipline with the focus of promoting healthy self-esteem to provide the skills and resourcefulness needed to live successfully and productively in the world.

During the process of creating your discipline system you may question if your decisions about your rules and limits, your rewards and consequences, support your effort to achieve this defined purpose.

I encourage you to research the developmental stages of your children to clearly understand the abilities and limitations reasonably expected at their ages. This understanding will be beneficial as you design clear limits with maximum freedom within those limits, and reasonable consequences.

Discuss your ideas, identify your need, and agree on your defined purpose.

Rules and Limits

Many parents can think of numerous things they don't want their children to do. Rules are for those things that children must do and must not do for their safety, their emotional and social development, and for harmony in the home. Define your rules clearly keeping the number of rules reasonable and appropriate for the child's age.

Too many rules with extreme limits with harsh consequences can be more than your child can accept. You need your children to accept the rules and the consequences, not defy them, for a system to be successful.

Limits are the boundaries you assign to the rules and they are important. A parent can be flexible with limits to build mutual respect and to meet changing demands families often experience. Limits must be clear, fair, reasonable and enforceable.

An example many parents can relate to is dinner time.

Children must obey when parents tell them to eat their dinner.

A child eats everything but the vegetables.

The parent tells the child: "If you want desert tonight you have to eat enough of your vegetables."

What is enough? It is unclear, confusing to the child.

The parent tells the child: "If you eat 3 spoonfuls of your vegetables you can have your desert tonight."

The limit is clear; the parent is flexible (choosing a reasonable amount), and provides an opportunity for the child to decide.

I've selected six recognizable situations to better clarify rules and limits:

1. Obey

You tell your child to "stop" before they run into the street.

You set a bedtime for your children. They get to stay up later on special occasions – birthdays, holidays, weekend nights.

2. Accept "no".

Your child wants another piece of candy. You say no.

Your child wants to go to their friend's house and play. You say no, not until you finish your homework.

3. No acting out to get your way.

Your child throws a tantrum because they want to play with the car their friend has.

Your child whines, not for the first time, because her brother has her toy. The siblings make a new rule – "It's yours, you want it, you get it."

4. No hurting people or animals

Your child intentionally hits their friend.

Your child accidentally steps on their sibling's fingers while playing.

(Rules and Limits continued)

5. No destroying property.

Your child breaks a toy in anger.

Your child accidentally colors on the table while doing an art project.

6. Accept consequences.

Children *must* accept the consequence of their behavior.

Flexibility in a choice of consequences is acceptable.

If a child refuses the consequence, the consequence is tripled.

I chose these common rules to represent opportunity to determine reasonable limits within a rule. Not all misbehavior is willful. Not all rule breaking warrants equal treatment. What's important is that your child accepts the rules, that the rules are reasonably enforced, and the consequences are accepted.

Families are comprised with a mix of backgrounds. There can be multiple religious beliefs, culture traditions, different ethnicity, and social diversity. The rules of your household will represent your personal beliefs and convictions. Only you will make your rules. It's imperative that parents agree on them and that their children understand them in order for the rules to be enforceable.

***For any discipline system to be successful children must do two things:
accept the rules and accept the consequences.***

Consequences

A consequence is simply the result of an action or inaction. Discipline for behavior modification is based on the idea that good behavior results in a positive consequence and bad behavior results in a negative consequence.

Consequences are issued to address and change specific behavior. It is not for a quick fix. Over time fair and reasonable consequences will enforce appropriate behavior and promote a child's healthy self-esteem. The more consistent you are and the more you include the following the sooner you will see results:

Apply positive consequences
frequently
with sincerity
with mindfulness of effort
with clear expectations
fairly and reasonably

Apply negative consequences:
without anger
with intent to correct
with empathy
with clarity
fairly and reasonably

The most important part of negative consequences is to have *both* active and passive consequences.

Active consequences are things children have to do to undo what they did. Things like chores, writing sentences, having to make announcements. Having to actively undo what was done. Active consequences do the best job of changing behavior in children because you can tailor the consequence to match better to the behavior.

Passive consequences are taking things away, like grounding, restricting screen time, putting a toy away. The reason we use passive consequences is they are easier to enforce. Children can't say no. You take it away. But passive consequences don't do nearly the job of managing the behavior as active consequences.

Active and Passive consequence – example:

Your nine year old yells at you when they're angry.

Consequence – take away screen time until they write "I will not yell" 5 times.

When they complete the writing consequence you reinforce their acceptance of the consequence with words. Good job.

You discuss why they were angry, empathize with their feelings, and teach them the appropriate way to talk to you when they're angry.

Ask them to tell you again why they were angry, this time the right way.

Reinforce the right way. A hug, a "perfect"!

The foundation for discipline is relationships. Parents who are loving, physically comforting, responsive, and meet the needs of their child their child will make their child feel safe, secure. The child trusts. If this trusting relationship continues as their child grows and their changing needs continue to be met with love and support the child will not need to be disruptive to get attention.

A child will get your attention one way or another. . . .

Spoiling
Rebuilding relationship
Life interruptions
Respect -
Absolute no nos

Trauma
Adhd
death

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