

# Parenting Blog

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## Latest Posts

*"Parents who are serious about raising children to be decent people spend an awful lot of time guiding them. It's not enough for us to have good values; these values must be communicated directly... For instance, to say nothing when a child acts selfishly is to send a clear message, and that message has more to do with the acceptability of selfishness than it does with the virtues of non-intrusive parenting. We need to establish clear moral guidelines, to be explicit about what we expect, but in a way that minimizes coercion."- Alfie Kohn*

How do you raise a child who assumes responsibility for her actions, including making amends and avoiding a repeat, whether the authority figure is present or not?

1. You give guidance about moral principles and expected behavior,
2. Stay connected so she WANTS to do the "right" thing,
3. Give her the tools to manage her emotions and therefore her behavior, and
4. Empower her to see the results of her actions,
5. So she can choose whether to repeat them.

Hard? Yes! That's what this Aha! Parenting website is all about--giving you the tools to raise responsible, considerate, happy kids, with connection instead of force.

In our last post, we reviewed why Why Punishment Doesn't Teach Your Child Accountability. Maybe the worst part of using punishment is that it erodes your influence with your child. As Thomas Gordon says, *"The inevitable result of consistently employing power to control your kids when they're young is that you never learn how to influence."*

But I can understand if you're feeling a bit nervous right about now. We all want to raise responsible, considerate, cooperative kids. Won't they just run wild without punishment?

The answer is no. **They will just run wild without guidance!** But guidance and punishment are not at all the same thing. Punishment is purposefully causing pain (physical or emotional) to force the child to do things our way. Guidance is showing our child the path we recommend, explaining why we think it's the best path, and giving our child the tools to stay on that path.

Unless we're willing to use force--which teaches immorality--influence is all we have to work with as parents.

Luckily, because humans resist force, influence actually works better to transmit values and



behavioral standards. Kids CHOOSE to do the right thing, because they want to "follow" our lead.

Effective Guidance includes:

- **Empathic limits** - We guide kids daily in their behavior, and often that involves setting limits. Kids can't hit, run in the street, or throw their food at each other. If we set those limits harshly, they'll eventually learn them, but with lots more resistance. If we set limits with an understanding of their perspective (*"You are so mad, but I won't let you hurt your brother! Come, I'll help you tell him how you feel"*) kids feel understood, and accept those limits more readily. They're more likely to share, rather than resist, parents' expectations.
- **Connection** - When kids start to feel disconnected -- because they're angry, because we're angry, because we've been apart from them all day, etc -- they act out until we can heal the disconnect. When kids feel connected to us, they're open to our influence. They WANT to behave, to cooperate, to please us. Since we're the most important people in our child's world, children are predisposed to listen to our guidance, as long as they're convinced we're on their side. Punishment erodes this connection, because we're intentionally hurting the child, either physically or emotionally.
- **Empathy** - When our "go-to" response to our child is empathy, he develops empathy for others -- even siblings! They treat others well because they care what others feel. As my teenage son said, *"When I was little, you helped me see that the things I did could hurt people, or help them. I didn't want to cause hurt."* Empathy is one of the foundations of morality.
- **Empower to Repair** - We all make mistakes, and every one of us has at one time or another damaged a relationship we care about. Kids need to know they can make amends. Once your child has calmed down, help her reflect on what she might do to rebuild what's broken. But resist the urge to make this into a punishment, or your child will resist and miss the deeper lesson.
- **Emotion Coaching** - When kids learn to manage their emotions, they can manage their behavior, so they're ABLE to behave and cooperate. We only gain control of our emotions by befriending them. Start by accepting your child's full range of emotion with as much compassion as you can muster, and lots of roughhousing play to work through feelings and anxiety. This gives your child the support she needs to understand and regulate her emotions, so she can behave as her best self. She learns that actions must be limited, but that she is more than enough, exactly as she is -- complete with all her complicated emotions. That feeling of "goodness" is what helps all of us make progress toward our good intentions.
- **Modeling** - Children learn their values and emotional regulation from what parents DO, not from what we SAY. As my teenage daughter said, *"You always listened to us and tried to work things out and you didn't punish us. So we learned to listen to each other, and other people, and to try to work things out so it works for everyone, and we don't use force to get our way."* Notice this is the foundation that keeps kids from participating in bullying.

- **Discussion** - Children learn from experience accompanied by reflection. It's our job to provide the opportunities for reflection. That means LOTS of talking and listening with our child, daily. If you only talk when there's a problem, you can count on lots of problems.

Helping your child take responsibility for his actions happens every day that you set empathic limits, connect, empathize, empower your child to repair, emotion coach, model, and discuss.

You'll notice that much of this is prevention. Prevention is always the most effective strategy, because once kids "misbehave" your options are more limited. Luckily, when you parent this way, kids don't act out as much. Once you get out of the habit of punishing and see how much your child WANTS to cooperate, you won't miss punishment at all.