



## **Discipline of the Child: An Overview** *American College of Pediatricians*

### **ABSTRACT**

**Central to the success of childrearing is the process of child discipline. This process of training and teaching a child is influenced by many factors, some of which are controlled by the parents and others that are dependent upon the child and the environment. This paper explores the multifactorial process of child discipline.**

The fundamental goal of parenting is to teach and assist the child in acquiring character traits such as self-control, teachability, respectfulness, integrity, honesty, and competency. These traits do not come naturally to the infant, toddler or preschooler, but through the disciplinary process a child will acquire them to some degree. *Discipline* is defined as “training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.”<sup>[1]</sup> In the context of parenting, the discipline process is comprised of three primary components: instruction, affirmation, and correction. These three parental efforts act upon the child’s temperament within a milieu that is influenced by environmental and parental factors. (See diagram below) This complex process produces a child outcome through the combination of many elements — most of which are within the parents’ control, particularly at younger ages.

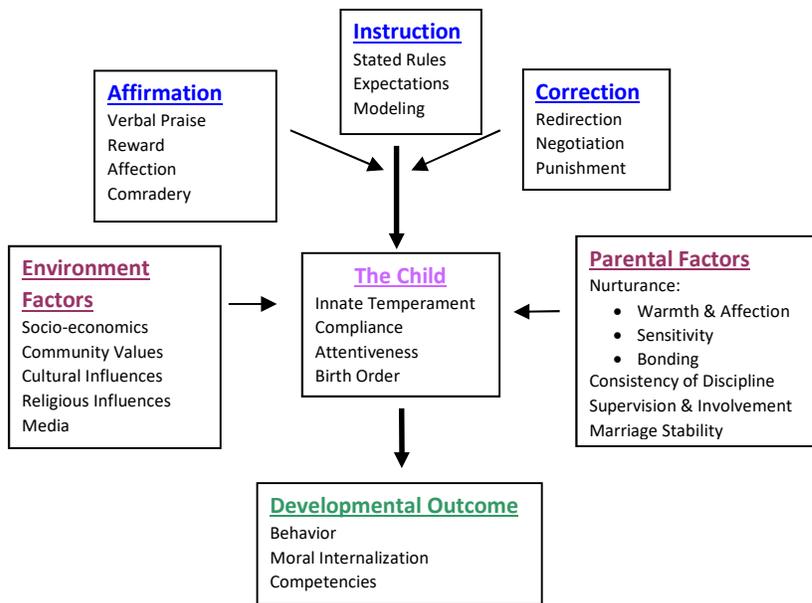
### **Developmental and Behavioral Theories**

Socialization is the term given to the complex interaction of a child’s genetic predisposition with the social and cultural expectations of the parents.<sup>[2]</sup> If the parents’ efforts are to be successful, their approach to discipline must accommodate to the child’s developmental stage and abilities. During the preoperative stage of development, ages 2-6 years, the child acts from an egocentric perspective with limited ability to distinguish between his own point of view and those of others. He has difficulty distinguishing causation from coincidence and reality from fantasy. During this period children are often not persuaded in their behavior by verbal reasoning alone, but respond more to its concurrent use with a combination of encouragement and correction.<sup>[3]</sup> For the older, more cognitively developed school aged child, reasoning and/or penalizing consequences are effective in socializing the behavior.

Behaviorists emphasize children’s learning through the interaction of the environment with the child’s behavior. The responses are characterized by what they teach the child. A response is called a *reinforcer* (affirmation) if it increases the likelihood of the desired behavior occurring again in the future; it is called a *punisher* (correction) if it decreases the likelihood of the behavior occurring again. Parental attention to the child is a powerful reinforcer of behavior. In his study showing that reasoning alone is an ineffective modifier of behavior in young children, Blum notes that “parental attention is appropriate for desired behaviors, but often parents inadvertently reinforce

inappropriate behaviors. If hitting a sibling results in attention from a parent using verbal reasoning, it may actually increase this undesired behavior.”<sup>[3]</sup> A third modifier of behavior is called *extinction*, where the child’s behavior elicits no response from the environment and thus is eventually extinguished. Extinction is demonstrated when ignoring a toddler’s mild temper tantrum results in its elimination. Choosing the right disciplinary measure for the child’s particular age and offense is essential to a parent’s success.

## DISCIPLINARY PROCESS



## COMPONENTS OF THE DISCIPLINE PROCESS

### **Instruction**

Of the three basic components of discipline, proper instruction is first and fundamental. A parent’s expectations must be communicated clearly and repetitively in order to begin to achieve compliance. After the desired behavior is communicated, the corrective consequence must also be known to the child. For the toddler, the consequence may not be understood initially due to his preoperant cognition, but with repetition his behavior will be modified by the reinforcer and punisher responses. For the older child, instruction will be understood and a volitional decision to comply or defy will consciously be made. Instruction can also be nonverbally communicated through parental modeling of proper behavior. Poor behavior outcomes are often linked to unclear or absent instruction, and inconsistent parental expectations.

### **Affirmation**

Affirmation represents the reinforcer response in the behavioral model. Relative to a child’s level of development, it will take the form of verbal praise, physical affection, or material reward. Affirmation encourages the child to repeat the target behavior, and it strengthens the parent-child relationship which in turn enhances the effectiveness of mild corrections, such as

reprimands or time out. Additionally, when parents seek to cooperate with reasonable child requests, the likelihood of child cooperation in the future is increased. Parents who use little affirmation and rely upon harsh and excessive correction fail to achieve optimal behavioral control.<sup>[4]</sup>

### **Correction**

Correction represents the punisher response in the behavioral model and is necessary when, in spite of encouragement, the child fails to follow instruction. For the infant, this may involve redirection or distraction. Brief expressions of disapproval (nonverbal or verbal) will also modify behavior at this stage. As a child's mobility and assertiveness mature, correction may require aversive punishers such as physical restraint or physical discomfort (hand slap) following disapproval. As cognition and determination mature, the toddler (> 18 months) may require a time-out or an occasional disciplinary spanking (depending upon the situation) since reasoning alone is usually ineffective at this age. For the older preschooler, reasoning and privilege removal will begin to be effective, and with the adolescent, grounding and work duty or monetary penalties are usually sufficient to achieve compliance.

Natural and logical consequences can be effective modifiers of behavior, and with timely occurrence they may preclude the need for any additional corrective action by the parent. Examples: Natural: A toddler disobediently runs from a parent on a sidewalk and with an accidental fall skins a knee. Logical: A toddler refuses to play nicely with a toy and therefore the toy is taken away for a period of time.

Parents who balance the use of correction with encouragement produce an optimal developmental outcome in the child.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **FACTORS AFFECTING THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS**

### **Child Factors**

A child's age, developmental level, and individual characteristics should be considered in the implementation of discipline. Innate temperament will influence a child's tendency toward compliance, as will his energy level and individual attentiveness. Even birth order is a determinant, with first born children generally being more persuadable than their subsequent siblings. Age influences a child's need for behavioral correction, with punishment more frequently needed and used during the preschool years.<sup>[5]</sup> All these child factors influence which disciplinary measure a parent uses in correction and how it is implemented.

### **Parental Factors**

Parental factors, such as nurturance, communication, stability of marriage, and effective disciplinary skills, play a pivotal role in child discipline. Parents act as key role models for acceptable and expected behavior.<sup>[6]</sup> Adult models significantly influence aggressive behavior in children.<sup>[7]</sup> Parental consistency and predictability are necessary in promoting acceptable behavior in children. Changing consequences, delayed imposition of consequences, and irregular application of consequences are practices that often characterize parents of "out-of-control children."<sup>[8]</sup> Proactive versus reactive correction leads to very different outcomes. A parent who

takes the *time* to instruct and forewarn a child is more likely to achieve a desired behavior than one who impulsively corrects a child's uninstructed behavior.

The parent-child relationship is foundational to the disciplinary process. Children respond best if discipline occurs in the context of warm, affectionate, accepting relationship. Parental involvement in and monitoring of a child's activities positively affect child compliance.

Bauman and Friedman summarize the results of negative parenting: "Ineffective parenting practices predict conduct disorder in childhood, which is strongly associated with academic failure, peer rejection, and later involvement in chronic deviant behavior, including aggression. Family variables are consistent covariates for early forms of deviant behavior. Families of antisocial children are characterized by harsh, inconsistent discipline, little positive parental involvement with the child, and poor monitoring and supervision. Inept parenting practices, which include noncontingent positive and negative reinforcers, mean coercive child behaviors are unwittingly reinforced."<sup>[9]</sup>

Finally, the father-mother married unit is fundamental to the health of a society and to the optimal development of the child.<sup>[10]</sup> Marital harmony models respect for one another and provides a stable environment for emotional growth. Children in families with high levels of marital conflict are more likely to have behavioral problems than those in families with low levels of conflict.<sup>[11]</sup> Instability of the marriage relationship can lead a child to reject the parents' values and defy their directives.

### **Environmental Factors**

Environmental factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, cultural views, ethnicity, religiosity and neighborhood composition, influence the effect on the child of disciplinary measures. Families with few socioeconomic resources often perceive physical punishment as more favorable than non-physical alternatives and achieve better behavioral control using it.<sup>[12]</sup> When environmental risk is high, parenting practices that are firmer and higher in control result in lower levels of young adolescent antisocial behavior.<sup>[13]</sup> In neighborhoods where the prevalence of corporal punishment is high, its use does not lead to greater child behavioral problems.<sup>[14]</sup> African American and lower-income youths are more approving of parental spanking as a disciplinary method.<sup>[15]</sup> Greater religiousness is tied to greater positivity in family relationships.<sup>[16]</sup> Conservative Christian parents of young children (particularly 3 year olds) are more likely to use spanking with defiant behavior, yet without a heightened use of severe physical discipline.<sup>[17]</sup>

### **DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOME**

A child's external behavior is one measure of the outcome of disciplinary process. However, *moral internalization*, defined as the likelihood that a child will perform a desired behavior even in the absence of corrective consequences or supervision, is the truer indicator of the long lasting impact of a parent's disciplinary influence upon a child. It is this achievement that requires successful orchestration of the numerous factors within the disciplinary process, as illustrated in Figure 1. The use or misuse of any one disciplinary component is unlikely to determine success or failure of the process. The parent-child relationship is the most foundational determinant of moral internalization as it influences the application of all measures of discipline.

## CONCLUSION

The disciplinary process is influenced by many factors; some that are controlled by the parents and others that depend entirely upon the child and his or her environment. When parents understand the disciplinary process and their role in properly apply its components, the outcome for the child is greatly enhanced.

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Updated: December 2021

*The American College of Pediatricians is a national association of licensed physicians and healthcare professionals who specialize in the care of infants, children, and adolescents. The mission of ACPeds is to enable all children to reach their optimal physical and emotional health and well-being.*

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