

Beyond Flintstones:

Children need to receive emotional vitamins

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If your child does not know how to read, you teach him. If your child does not know how to swim, you teach him. If your child does not know how to tie his shoes, you teach him. If your child does not know how to write, you teach him. If your child does not know how to behave, you ... teach or punish him?

In many cases, the word discipline is confused with punishment. According to the dictionary, the word discipline comes from the word disciple. In its simplest form, disciple means to teach - not punish. In the long run, what happens to children who are constantly punished?

As a preschool teacher in my 4-year-old classroom, I remember the day Dominic's mother entered my classroom for afternoon pick-up. After waving to me, she removed the note from her child's cubbie. The note explained that Dominic was fighting with other children throughout the day. I watched Dominic's mother spank him all the way out the door while chanting "I ... told ... you ... not to hit." And because Mom wasn't practicing what she was preaching, Dominic's confusion set in.

Even though Dominic's mother had the best intentions in mind, she was actually showing Dominic something completely different than what she was trying to teach him. Children imitate our behavior. No matter the action, good or bad, they are always watching. Whether we make fun of people who are different than ourselves, speak kind words to a neighbor, yell at another driver who pulls out in front of us or pick up trash that was left on the ground and throw it in a trash can, they are always watching and learning.

Our actions speak much louder than our words. Dominic will more likely learn that hitting is an acceptable action over using words because this is what his mother demonstrated to him. Parents are the No. 1 influence in how children approach life. From parents, children learn either self-control, trust and competency or they learn anger, jealousy and fear.

There are several simple things that parents can do to strengthen their relationship with their child and get on the road to feeding their children emotionally. First, we should behave as we expect children to behave. If we ask our children to remain calm and talk through a situation, then we should model the same behavior.

Secondly, a helpful way to feed children emotionally is to set reasonable and realistic expectations. To do this we must know, as a parent, what our children are capable of for their age and level of ability. If we take a 1-year-old into the grocery store after visiting with friends and she has missed her midday nap, we cannot expect her to sit quietly and happily because her

routine has been interrupted. If the child becomes fussy, we must realize we delayed the child's nap and respond with understanding rather than frustration. A situation such as this is usually treated as a discipline issue rather than a delay in meeting her physical needs.

Finally, always remember children's feelings should be respected. As a parent if we are having a bad day, we feel justified in being upset. As long as we express our emotions in an acceptable way, we model that behavior for our children. When children's emotional needs are not respected, they could learn not to count on us to understand or help them.

Here is my charge to you, parents: If you want your children to be a valuable member of society and have much success, you must do one thing. Before you react quickly to a behavior problem presented by your child, stop and ask yourself, how can I teach instead of punish? Going to the store to buy Flintstone vitamins is the easy part. Actually feeding your child emotional vitamins will come from your ability to respond calmly to these same situations. By doing this, you are giving your child the gift of a solid foundation for the future.

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