

The essential tools every parent needs.

# What Every PARENT Should Know

By Dr. Thomas Gordon

## CHILDREN DON'T MISBEHAVE

David, a very curious and active three-year-old, empties everything out of his mother's desk and is drawing on her file folders with Crayola markers. Discovering this mess, his mother angrily pops David on the rear. David, of course, cries and looks bewildered.

When David's father gets home, he is greeted with the mother's report, "Our darling son certainly misbehaved today." Predictably, her husband asks, "What did he do?" His question is quite understandable because the message "David misbehaved" communicates nothing about what David actually did, only that his mother made an evaluation of David himself—he was a "misbehaving" child.

If parents only knew how much trouble this concept causes in

families. Thinking in terms of children misbehaving not only spells trouble for kids, obviously, but it also brings on unnecessary problems for parents.

Why is this so? What is wrong with thinking and saying that your child misbehaves? Every parent does. Yes, and their parents before them. In fact, the origin of the concept of child misbehavior goes back so far in history that it is doubtful if anyone actually knows when it started or why. It is such a commonly employed term that its use in families has seldom been challenged.

Strangely enough, the term is almost exclusively applied to children seldom to adults, friends, or spouses. How often have you overheard anyone say:

*"My husband misbehaved yesterday."*

*"I got so angry when my friend misbehaved during lunch."*

*"My employees have been misbehaving."*

*"Our guests misbehaved at our party last night."*

Apparently, then, only children are seen as misbehaving—no one else. Misbehavior is parent language, tied up somehow with the way parents traditionally have viewed their offspring. Parents say that children misbehave when their actions (or their behaviors) are contrary to what parents think they ought to be. More accurately, misbehavior is behavior that produces some sort of bad consequence for the parent.

*Misbehavior = behavior bad for the parent.*

On the other hand, when a child engages in behavior that does not bring bad consequences for the parent, that child is described as "behaving."

*"Debbie behaved herself today."*

*"Michael was well behaved at the store."*

**“Thinking in terms of children misbehaving not only spells trouble for kids, obviously, but it also brings on unnecessary problems for parents.”**

*“We try to teach our children to behave.”*

Parents would be more effective, and life at home more pleasant for everyone, if they would begin thinking about children’s behavior in a different way. First, try to remember that all of children’s actions are behaviors. Each thing they do or say is a specific behavior. Viewed in this way, all day long a child is behaving. And for the very same reason all other creatures engage in behaviors—they are trying to get their needs met.

An infant cries because he is hungry or cold or in pain. Something is wrong; his organism needs something. Crying behavior is the infant’s way of saying “Help.” Such behavior, in fact, should be viewed as quite appropriate (“good”), for the crying is apt to bring the child the help that is needed. When seen as an organism behaving rather appropriately to get a need met, the child certainly cannot be evaluated as *misbehaving!*

Similarly, when three-year-old David was exploring and removing the contents of the desk, that behavior, seen as a manifestation of his need to see new shapes and sizes, handle objects or draw, would not have been labeled by his mother as misbehaving.

Family life would be infinitely less exasperating for parents, and more

enjoyable for children as well, if parents would accept these simple principles about children:

**PRINCIPLE I:**  
**Like everyone else children have needs and to get their needs met, they act or behave.**

**PRINCIPLE II:**  
**Children don’t misbehave: they simply behave to get their needs met.**

This does not mean, however, that parents will like all of the behaviors that their children engage in. Nor should parents be expected to, for children are bound to do things that produce unacceptable consequences for their parents. Kids can be loud and destructive, delay you when you’re in a hurry, pester you when you need quiet, cause you extra work, clutter up the house, interrupt your conversation, and break your valuables.

Think about such behaviors this way: they are behaviors children are engaging in to meet their needs. If at the same time they happen to interfere with your pursuit of pleasure, that doesn’t mean that the child is misbehaving. Rather, her particular way of behaving is unacceptable to you. Don’t interpret that the child is trying to do something to you—she is only trying to do something for herself. And this does not make her a bad child or a misbehaving child.

**“Parents would be more effective, and life at home more pleasant for everyone, if they would begin thinking about children’s behaviors in a different way.”**

If parents would strike the word misbehaving from their vocabulary, they would rarely feel judgmental and angry. Consequently, they would not feel like retaliating with punishment, as in the situation with little David and his mother. All parents, however, do need to learn some effective methods for modifying behavior that interferes with their needs, but labeling the child as misbehaving is not one of them. Nor is punishment, of any kind.

### **BE A PERSON, NOT A “PARENT”**

There is something about becoming a parent that makes people forget that they are persons. They start to play the role of a parent. Karen and Steve, two persons, suddenly feel that they must transform themselves into Mom and Dad, two parents. Unfortunately, this transformation makes people forget that they are still human—with faults, limitations, feelings, inconsistencies, and, above all, rights.

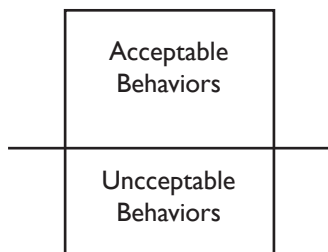
Forgetting their humanness is the first serious mistake parents make on entering parenthood. They take on a heavy burden of responsibility; they develop feelings of guilt and inadequacy; they try too hard; they lose their realness. And their

children suffer, too, because kids deeply appreciate their parents being real and human. Have you ever heard kids say, “My mom is a nice person”; “My father is a real guy”; “They’re really great people”?

How can parents be persons to their children? By understanding a few simple principles about human relationships—truths that apply equally to all parent-child relationships.

Children inevitably do things that make their parents feel exasperated, irritated, frustrated, put-upon, resentful, disappointed, or just plain mad.

Children are no different from your spouse or relatives or friends or co-workers, all of whom can, from time to time, provoke similar feelings. Imagine that you always view your child's behaviors—everything he does or says—through a window in front of you. Now think of that window as having two sections, a top and a bottom section. Adopt the rule of viewing all of your child's unacceptable behaviors through the bottom part of the window, and all of the acceptable behaviors through the top, as in this picture:



Julie, running and playing loudly outside, is behavior you would probably view through the top part of your window—it is acceptable to you. Julie doing the same thing in the living room, however, undoubtedly would be viewed through the bottom part of your window—it is unacceptable to you.

**“All parents need to learn some effective methods for modifying behavior that interferes with their needs, but labeling the child as misbehaving is not one of them.”**

All parents have two sections in their windows. That is to say, because parents are persons, not gods, some of their children's behaviors will be unacceptable. A more direct way of putting this: you won't like what your children are doing some of the time, and hence you won't really like *them* some of the time.

If you don't like the way that sounds, just remember that at times you don't like your spouse, your friends, your relatives, and so

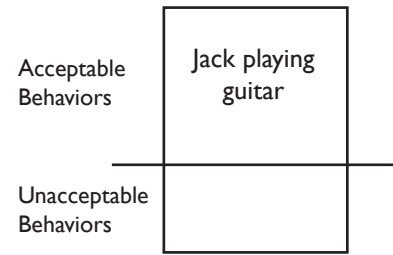
on. In these relationships with others, however, their unacceptable behaviors do not usually have the same strong effect on you, as a person, as do the behaviors of your children. When a friend does something that you don't like, you're apt to excuse it as an idiosyncrasy: "That's just the way Katie is—forgetful." Nor are you apt to feel responsible for the friend's behavior—or to feel inadequate or like a failure.

Yet when your children engage in behavior that interferes with your needs, don't you often feel that you are somehow responsible? You feel parental responsibility for your children's behavior! What did you do wrong? You must be a bad parent!

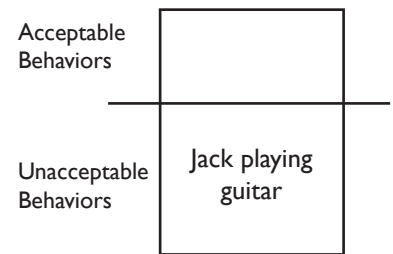
**PRINCIPLE III:  
Parents can't be accepting of all behavior of their children**

You're feeling rested and energetic and happy with the world. Jack, your 12-year-old, is playing his guitar with considerable gusto. It doesn't bother you at all; in fact, you're delighted to see him getting such a kick out of practicing. Jack's behavior is

seen through the top part of your window—it's quite acceptable to you.



It is two days later, and you're exhausted and trying to catch a half-hour nap. Jack again starts to play his guitar loudly. You know that you can't drop off to sleep with that darned guitar blasting in your ears. It is very unacceptable to you—you see Jack's guitar playing today in the bottom part of your window.



Are you being inconsistent? Of course. But for a very good reason. You are a different person today from the person you were two days ago. Being human, you change. But you were real then, and you are real today. If you had reacted consistently both days, you would have been unreal one of those days—phony, if you will.

Being inconsistent in your reaction to a child's behavior is being a real person; it is also inevitable. Despite the advice of countless child-rearing experts, parents can and will be inconsistent. And I would say that they *should* be inconsistent.

**PRINCIPLE IV:  
Parents don't have to be  
consistent with children.**

But what about the effect on the child? In the first place, children understand that their parents have good days and bad, that one situation can be different from another. It happens to them!

Second, kids grow to respect parents who are honest about their feelings, and grow to distrust those who are not.

The traditional belief in being consistent also influences mothers and fathers to think that they must always be consistent or united with each other's reactions to their child's behavior. This, too, is nonsense. Parents are told to back each other up so that the child believes that both parents feel the same way about a particular unacceptable behavior.

What is wrong with this entrenched idea is that it requires one parent to be untrue to his or her real feelings. It asks one parent to play a role, be phony. Again, children are able to perceive such phoniness, and they dislike it. An adolescent girl confirmed this for me when she said, "I don't respect my father—in fact I hate his weakness. Whatever my mother feels about things I do, he takes her side even though I know he doesn't agree."

Parents cannot hide their true feelings, and they should not try. Rather, parents should accept the fact that one parent may feel accepting of a behavior and the other feel unaccepting. The effective parent

realizes that he or she will inevitably feel different on different days about the same behavior. Parents

are people, not gods. They do not have to act unconditionally accepting toward all behaviors, or even consistently accepting toward one behavior. Neither should they pretend to be accepting in order

to present a united front.

**PRINCIPLE V:  
Parents don't have to put up a  
"united front."**

While all children would undoubtedly prefer to be accepted all the time, they can constructively handle their parents' unaccepting feelings when the parents send honest messages that match their true feelings.

Not only does this make it easier for children to learn to judge the appropriateness of various behaviors, but it also helps them grow to see their parents as real persons—transparent, human, and people with whom they would like a relationship.

**YOU CAN CHANGE  
BEHAVIOR YOU DON'T  
LIKE WITHOUT USING  
PUNISHMENT**

When children's behavior interferes with their parents' needs, as it inevitably will, parents naturally want to try to modify such behavior. After all, parents do have needs. They have their own lives to live and the right to derive satisfaction and enjoyment from their existence. But parents make two serious mistakes. First, much to their regret, many parents ignore unacceptable

behaviors and watch their children grow up to be terribly inconsiderate or even oblivious to their parents' needs. If parents permit this, they develop strong feelings of resentment and even grow to dislike such ungrateful or selfish kids. Second, most parents choose punishment as their first approach in trying to modify unacceptable behavior. If parents permissively ignore behavior they don't like, they suffer; if they rely on punishment, their kids suffer. And in both cases the relationship suffers. But what can parents do so that children learn to respect their parents' needs and rights? There are effective methods for infants, toddlers, and older children.

***With Infants and Preverbal  
Children***

Very young children, who may be unable to understand verbal messages, present a special problem

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for parents. Nevertheless, it is actually quite easy to influence infants and preverbal children to modify behavior unacceptable to parents, provided the right approach is used. Parents can choose from four different approaches—all very effective:

- The guessing game
- "Let's make a trade"
- The nonverbal I-Message
- Changing the environment

**The guessing game:** Effective parents must learn to be good guessers with infants and toddlers simply because these children can't tell parents much about what's going on inside them. Emily, six months old, starts to cry loudly in the middle of the night. Her parents are awakened from the sleep they need and naturally find this behavior unacceptable. But how can they get Emily to stop crying? Quite simply, they start guessing. Finding the cause of her crying so that they can remedy the problem is something like a puzzle.

Maybe she's wet and cold. We'll check first on that. No, she's still dry. Well, could it be we didn't burp her enough, and she is feeling uncomfortable with gas? Let's pick her up and start the burping process. Bad guess again—Emily won't burp. Wonder if she's hungry? There is still some milk in her bottle, but it got pushed down to the end of the crib. We'll act on that hypothesis next.

Success! Emily sucks for a few minutes and then gets sleepy. They put her back into her crib gently, and she falls asleep. Her parents can go back to bed now and get their own needs met.

That is an example of the guessing game, an approach that parents have to use very frequently with infants when they whine incessantly, when they are restless and pestering, when they can't get to sleep, when they throw their food on the floor. The guessing game works effectively because when infants do things that are unacceptable to their parents there's a reason for it—usually a very logical reason. When parents start using the guessing game, they stop resorting to punishment.

**PRINCIPLE VI:**  
**When infants behave unacceptably, there is a good reason, but you have to try to guess what it is.**

**“It is actually quite easy to influence infants and preverbal children to modify behavior unacceptable to parents, provided the right approach is used.”**

Sometimes parents find the guessing game easy; other times more difficult. The cliché “if at first you don't succeed, try, try again” is the soundest advice I know for parents. Actually, parents can get quite good at the game because they get to know their offspring better and better. Parents have told me that they eventually learned to tell the difference between a wet-cry, a hungry-cry and a gas-cry.

**“Let's make a trade.”** Another approach for changing unacceptable behaviors of infants and toddlers involves trading: substituting the unacceptable behavior for another behavior that would be acceptable to the parent.

Laura, your curious one-year-old, has found a pair of your new stockings, which she finds enjoyable to touch and tug on. You find this unacceptable because you're afraid she'll snag or destroy them. You go to your drawer and pull out an old pair that is already snagged and beyond being wearable. You place this pair in her hands and gently take away the new pair. Laura, not knowing the difference, finds the damaged pair equally as enjoyable to

touch and tug. Her needs are met and so are yours.

Dave is jumping up and down on the couch, and his mother fears that he will knock the lamp off the end table. She gently but firmly removes Dave from the couch and proceeds to jump up and down with him on the pillows, which she removed from the couch and put on the floor.

Shelly, age 18 months, starts to get up on her dad's lap on the very night he is dressed in his freshly cleaned light-colored suit. Dad notices that Shelly's hands are covered with jam mixed with equal parts of peanut butter. Dad gently restrains Shelly, but then immediately goes to the bathroom, gets a wet washcloth, and wipes her hands clean. Then he picks Shelly up and puts her on his lap.

Again, when parents start thinking in terms of trading, they stop using punishment.

**PRINCIPLE VII:**  
**When you can't accept one behavior, substitute another you can.**

**The nonverbal I-Message.** Older children often modify their behavior after a parent sends them an honest message that conveys how the parent is affected by the child's behavior, as in:

*“I can't hear on the phone when there's so much yelling.”*

*“I'm afraid I'll be late if you take too long to dress.”*

*“I love that little dish, and I would be sad if it got broken.”*

But children too young to understand words won't be influenced by such



messages (called “I-Messages” because they convey to the child “Let me tell you how I am feeling”). Consequently, the I-Message has to be put into a nonverbal form, as in the following examples:

While Dad is carrying little Tony in the supermarket, he starts to kick Dad in the stomach, laughing with each kick. Dad immediately puts Tony down on his feet and continues walking. (Message: “It hurts me when I get kicked in the stomach; so I don’t like to carry you.”)

Judy stalls and pokes getting into the car when her mother is in a terrible hurry. Mother puts her hand on Judy’s rump and gently but firmly guides her onto the front seat. (Message: “I need you to get in right now because I’m in a hurry.”)

**PRINCIPLE VIII:  
Let kids know how you feel, even if you can’t use words.**

The key to employing this method of trying to modify unacceptable behavior is avoiding any kind of behavior that will be punishing or painful to the child. After all, you only want him to know how you are feeling. Slapping, hitting, thumping, pushing, jerking, yelling, pinching—all these methods inevitably communicate to the child that he’s bad, he’s wrong, his needs don’t count, he’s done something criminal, and he deserves to be punished.

**Changing the environment.** Most parents intuitively know that one effective way of stopping many kinds of unacceptable behavior is to change the child’s environment, as opposed to efforts to change the child directly. What parent has not watched a whiny, pestering, bored child get totally (and quietly) immersed when

her parent provides her with some materials that capture her interest, such as clay, finger paints, puzzles, picture books, or old scraps of colored cloth. This is called “Enriching the Environment.”

At other times kids need just the opposite. They’re keyed up and hyperactive just before bedtime, for example, so the wise parent knows how to “Impoverish the Environment.” Overstimulated children often will calm down if they are read or told a story (real or fiction), or if they have a quiet period of sharing the day’s events. Much of the storm and stress of bedtime could be avoided if parents made an effort to reduce the stimulation of their children’s environment.

Most unacceptable (and destructive) behavior of toddlers can be avoided by serious efforts on the part of parents to “Child-proof the Environment,” as with:

- Buying unbreakable cups and glasses
- Putting matches, knives, and razor blades out of reach
- Relocating medicine and household cleaners
- Keeping the basement door locked
- Securing slippery throw rugs

**PRINCIPLE IX:  
It’s often more efficient to change the child’s environment than to change the child.**

**With Older Children**

When children understand verbal language, you can talk straight to

them, hoping that they will take into consideration your needs and decide on their own to change their behavior. By far the most effective method is to send a verbal I-Message. As explained previously, an I-Message is one that communicates to the child only what is happening to you as a consequence of his behavior, as in the following examples:

*“When the TV is on so loud, I can’t talk with your mom.”*

*“I’m not going to enjoy the flowers I planted if they’re trampled on.”*

While it appears to be straightforward, sending I-Messages is not easy to learn, primarily because most parents are so locked into the habit of sending You-Messages when they encounter unacceptable behavior. You-Messages contain a heavy component of blame, judgment, evaluation, threat, power or put-downs. Here are the most common types of You-Messages:

- *YOU clean up that mess.* (ORDERING)
- *If YOU don’t stop that, you’ll go to your room.* (WARNING)
- *YOU shouldn’t come to the table without washing your hands.* (PREACHING)
- *YOU could go outside and play.* (ADVISING)
- *YOU ought to know better.* (MORALIZING)
- *YOU are acting like a baby.* (EVALUATING)
- *YOU are just showing off.* (ANALYZING)

- *YOU need to learn some manners. (TEACHING)*
- *YOU are driving me to an early grave. (INDUCING GUILT)*
- *Look at these gray hairs YOU have caused me. (BLAMING)*

Instead of influencing kids to change, You-Messages make children defensive and resistive to change, and over time they seriously shatter children's self-esteem. What's more, they provoke youngsters to strike back with a You-Message of their own, causing the situation to escalate into a verbal battle royal, often bringing tears, hurt feelings, slammed doors, threats of punishment, and a fractured relationship.

I-Messages, on the other hand, are much less apt to provoke resistance to change. When kids hear that their parents are hurting, their natural desire to help out emerges. Furthermore, when kids are not put down or blamed for having their needs, they are much more willing to be considerate of their parents' needs.

**PRINCIPLE X:**  
**To change unacceptable behavior of your child, talk about yourself, not your child.**

Probably the greatest reward for parents who learn to send I-Messages is that their children eventually model after them. To tell your child honestly how you feel is revealing your own humanness. She learns that you can be hurt, tired, disappointed, harried, worried, and fearful. Such honesty on your part will serve as a model, and you will see your children begin to be honest and real with you. Instead of being strangers in the same household, as in so many

families, parents and children develop an authentic and open relationship. Parents experience the job of having honest children, and the children are blessed by having real persons as parents.

## THE TERRIBLE DANGERS OF DISCIPLINE

Ask 100 parents, "Should children be disciplined?" and 90 unhesitatingly will answer, "Of course." That parents should discipline their children has been so commonly believed (and strongly defended) that to question the validity of the idea may seem like some kind of heresy or foolishness. Yet, I know of no other belief that causes parents more trouble than does the concept of discipline. From experience working with thousands of parents in Parent Effectiveness Training classes, I have become convinced that it is actually a very dangerous belief, for it alienates parents and children and thus contributes to the deterioration of parent-child relationships.

Interestingly enough, most parents who discipline their children are motivated by the best of intentions. They want their kids to be responsible, dependable, thoughtful, courteous, competent, and much more. Parents simply know of no other way to carry out their good intentions. So they use discipline. Then, when they find that discipline isn't working well, they usually decide that they should discipline even more strongly. And so it goes, until kids rebel, retaliate or leave home.

**"I know of no other belief that causes parents more trouble than does the concept of discipline."**

What is this discipline parents feel they need to use? What does it mean? The dictionary defines discipline as punishment by one in power in order to bring about obedience. The key to the term discipline is the concept of power or authority—power to obtain obedience or power to enforce order by using punishment.

Officers discipline their subordinates; animal trainers discipline dogs in obedience school; teachers discipline their students; parents discipline their children. But where do all these people get their power?

Power is acquired when one person possesses what another person needs badly; we call these rewards. The teacher has grades to hand out, and the dog trainer has food to offer the hungry dog. Power also is acquired when one person possesses the means for inflicting pain or discomfort on another; we call these punishments. The teacher can keep students after school or send them

to the vice-principal's office; the dog trainer can jerk the choke chain and hurt the dog's neck.

Rewards and punishments give people power, and power is the basis for their

position of authority over others. Consequently, when parents say that they use their authority in disciplining kids, they mean that they make use of rewards and punishments. They offer (or promise) rewards to get the behavior they want from their children, and they inflict (or threaten to inflict) punishment to get rid of behavior they don't want. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

In practice, however, disciplining children through rewards and punishments is not nearly as easy as it sounds. There are pitfalls for the parent, and some can be quite dangerous and destructive for the parent-child relationship.

In the first place, parents are inevitably going to run out of power. When children are very young, parents have a great deal of power over them. Parents possess a lot of rewards that work quite well and punishments that make kids toe the mark. As children get older, however, parents begin to run out of effective rewards, as well as potent punishments. Rewards that once worked for them are met with disinterest. In the case of punishment, children begin to resist or rebel. When they reach the teen years, their parents come up empty handed.

One father in a Parent Effectiveness Training class expressed it this way:

*“My son is 15 now, and the only source of power I have left is the car keys. And in six months that won’t work because he’ll have his own car.”*

The mother of a 14-year-old girl admitted:

*“Annie simply ignores most of my promises of gifts and favors. ‘Who needs it?’ she says, and then she keeps on doing what she pleases.”*

Parents who have relied heavily on disciplining their children when very young discover to their dismay that they have run out of power when the kids reach adolescence. And then they find that they don’t have any other way to influence their kids. This is why the adolescent years for most

families turn out to be frustrating, stressful, and stormy.

**PRINCIPLE XI:  
Parents who use power inevitably run out of it when kids get older.**

Apart from the inevitable parental impotency that follows from the early use of power, there are other consequences of disciplining children that are destructive to the parent, to the child, and to their relationship. Parents are often unaware of the fact

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that children, faced with a disciplining parent wielding power with rewards and punishments, develop coping mechanisms—learned responses (often becoming habitual) to help them deal with, adjust to, or fight against their parents’ attempts to control or mold them.

In Parent Effectiveness Training classes, parents are asked to recall their own youth, when parents (and teachers) used power over them, and then to list the various coping mechanisms they adopted in response to their parents’ discipline efforts. The composite list includes practically every one of the following coping mechanisms:

- *Resistance, defiance, rebellion, negativism*
- *Resentment, anger, hostility*
- *Retaliation, aggression, hitting back*

- *Lying, hiding feelings, clamming up*
- *Blaming others, tattling*
- *Bossing, bullying*
- *Needing to win, cheating, hating to lose*
- *Organizing against parents, combining forces*
- *Submission, compliance, fear*
- *Buttering up, currying favor*
- *Conformity, lack of creativity, needing to be proper and safe, passivity*
- *Withdrawing, escaping, fantasizing*

When parents grasp the idea that their own children are going to use identical coping mechanisms in response to their authority and discipline, they begin to wonder why any parent would want to use power and authority to discipline children. In fact, it is my experience that most parents do not enjoy being dictatorial, demanding, and punishing. They don’t really want to coerce children; they want to influence them.

**PRINCIPLE XII:  
Children learn to cope with parental power with undesirable and unhealthy behaviors.**

Parents, of course, would like to see their children become responsible, considerate of others, cooperative, happy, and healthy. But most parents know of no way to foster these characteristics other than to discipline. Yet disciplining children, based as it must be on the use of parental power, never influences; it only forces them to behave in prescribed ways. Discipline compels or prevents behavior, usually leaving the child unpersuaded, unconvinced, and unmotivated. As a matter of fact, children generally return to their former ways as soon as the parental power is removed (or absent), because their needs and desires



remain unchanged when they are coerced.

**PRINCIPLE XIII:  
Discipline may compel or coerce, but it seldom influences.**

Most parents are reluctant to give up their power to discipline because the only alternative they see is being permissive. And few parents want inconsiderate, unmanageable, or irresponsible kids—the type of children produced by permissiveness. I pointed out previously that parents must protect their rights and suggested some effective ways of modifying unacceptable behavior—nonpower methods. But what if they don't work? What can parents do when conflicts occur?

**“They don't really want to coerce children; they want to influence them.”**

**HOW TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS SO NOBODY LOSES**

Conflicts arise in any relationship between two or more persons. More conflicts arise in some relationships than in others. Healthy and satisfying relationships can have many conflicts because it is not the frequency of conflicts that hurts people's relationships but the methods they use to try to resolve them.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the parent-child relationship. Most parents rely heavily on two methods that in the long run are destructive to their relationship with their children. They could learn to use a third method that invariably enhances their relationship.

The two methods for resolving conflicts that most parents use are both win-lose methods, where one person wins and the other loses. Method I is the approach in which the parent decides what the solution to the conflict is going to be, and then uses power to get compliance and makes the child carry out the solution.

Four-year-old Natalie always wants her daddy to play with her immediately after he gets home from work. Daddy, however, feels tired from driving the freeway home and needs to relax. He likes to read

the paper and relax when he first gets home. Usually Natalie crawls on his lap, musses the paper and interrupts his reading.

**Parent wins, child loses. Child resents parents.**

METHOD I: Daddy tells Natalie to go outside and play and threatens punishment if she doesn't. He just does not feel like playing, and he's determined to rest. Natalie sulks, cries, and feels resentful. Daddy feels guilty. She loses; her needs are not met. Daddy wins; his needs are met.

If Natalie's father had used Method II, the result would also be a win-lose situation, for Method II is an approach in which the parent gives in to the child's solution. Consequently, the child gets her needs met at the expense of the parent's needs remaining unmet.

**Child wins, parent loses. Parent resents child.**

METHOD II: Daddy succumbs to Natalie's coaxing and reluctantly agrees to play with her, despite his being tired and not having his heart in it. He feels put-upon and resentful (and acts like a martyr). Natalie senses this and feels a twinge of guilt. Natalie wins; her needs are met. Daddy loses; his needs are not met.

When parents use Method I to resolve conflicts with their kids, they are acting like dictators, and with Method II, they are doormats. Children learn to respond to the power parents use in Method I with one or several of the unhealthy coping mechanisms described previously. Children learn to respond to Method II by becoming selfish and inconsiderate, usually accompanied by a perception that nobody else's needs are important in this world. The results of permissiveness are perhaps as destructive to the parent-child relationship as the results of the authoritarian method of handling conflicts.

**PRINCIPLE XIV:  
If parents are either dictators or doormats, someone is going to lose.**

Parents have an alternative to being either strict or lenient, authoritarian or permissive. There is a way of taking power struggles out of family conflicts. Most parents have to learn how to use this method, for their own parents seldom used it with them.

Method III is an approach to resolving conflicts in which parent and child together offer possible solutions to their conflict and ultimately select one solution that is acceptable to both. This is a solution that allows both parent and child to get their needs met.

**Both win or nobody loses. And thus there is no resentment at all.**

**METHOD III:**

Daddy states the problem to Natalie, “You want to play with me when I get home, but I don’t feel like playing right away because I’m so tired from driving on the freeway.”

Daddy then suggests that they both think of solutions that might make them both happy. In a few minutes they arrive at a solution both of them accept. Daddy promises to play with Natalie provided she waits until he has finished relaxing and reading the paper. He will have his rest period, after which Natalie will get her play period.

**“There is a way of taking power struggles out of family conflicts.”**

Method III, called the No-Lose Method, eliminates the power struggles that are so much a part of Methods I and II.

Another benefit is that it brings about a high degree of motivation for children to carry out the decision. It’s their decision; they have participated in finding it. Parents who adopt the

No-Lose Method for solving all conflicts frequently report that it brings about closer, warmer, and much more loving relationships in the family. Children appreciate their parents’ willingness to consider their needs, and vice versa.

**PRINCIPLE XV:**  
**When conflicts are resolved so nobody loses, the relationship deepens.**

Parents have also reported marked changes in their children after the No-Lose Method became established in their homes: improved grades at school, fewer tears and temper tantrums, better relationships with their peers, more responsibility about homework and chores, more self-confidence, a happier disposition, less aggression and hyperactivity, and fewer sicknesses.

**A CREDO**

The philosophy underlying all of the principles that have been suggested for parenting can be expressed in the form of a credo that’s shown below.

***A Credo For My Relationships***

You and I are in a relationship which I value and want to keep. We are also two separate persons with our own individual values and needs.

So that we will better know and understand what each of us values and needs, let us always be open and honest in our communication.

When you are experiencing a problem in your life, I will try to listen with genuine acceptance and understanding in order to help you find your own solutions rather than imposing mine. And I want you to be a listener for me when I need to find solutions to my problems.

At those times when your behavior interferes with what I must do to get my own needs met, I will tell you openly and honestly how your behavior affects me, trusting that you respect my needs and feelings enough to try to change the behavior that is unacceptable to me. Also, whenever some behavior of mine is

unacceptable to you, I hope you will tell me openly and honestly so I can try to change my behavior.

And when we experience conflicts in our relationship, let us agree to resolve each conflict without either of us resorting to the use of power to win at the expense of the other’s losing. I respect your needs, but I also must respect my own. So let us always strive to search for a solution that will be acceptable to both of us. Your needs will be met, and so will mine—neither will lose, both will win.

In this way, you can continue to develop as a person through satisfying your needs, and so can I. Thus, ours can be a healthy relationship in which both of us can strive to become what we are capable of being. And we can continue to relate to each other with mutual respect, love and peace.

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Thomas Gordon, Ph.D., Founder  
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