

THREE

More Authority = Less Discipline

Parenthood is packed with irony. During the teen years most of us need to be at our child-rearing strongest. The typical teen is more savvy and willful than even the toughest preschooler. And the discipline issues are a lot more complex than figuring out who kicked over the toy blocks.

But this is often when many of us are losing discipline steam. We've been at this now for at least twelve years. Just when we're hoping to gear down our guidance, discipline and supervision, this parenting journey is forcing us to ramp up all three.

Well, if we don't have quite the energy and stamina we had when we were younger, we'd better find some ways to compensate. A prime way is to increase our authority, because stronger authority—calm, confident, composed—means less discipline effort and ultimately better kids.

Better Late Than Never

Dear Dr. Ray,

My son is fifteen. I've been a weak disciplinarian since he was little. Is it too late for me to change, for his sake and mine?

Slow Learner Mom

It's too late to change ourselves when this life is over. Short of that, improvement is always possible. That said, sometimes the odds of our change making much difference may be low. Nevertheless, you must act in the hopes of success, no matter what the reality might be.

Let's say your doctor has just discovered that you have been eating foods that are damaging your stomach. How do you react to this revelation? You stop eating those foods immediately, even if you're not sure your stomach will respond. At the least you want no further damage; at best you want to heal.

At some point in their child rearing, most parents become aware if they've been moving in a bad direction. The evidence accumulates over time. Unfortunately for many, awareness doesn't necessarily lead to change. But for those for whom it does, there is bad news and good news. The bad news: the longer-lived the problems, the slower and harder the improvement. The good news: The chances of success are much higher now than they were before the change of direction.

In your situation the bad news: Your son is not eight years old. The good news: He's not eighteen.

So once you start to change, how will he change? First in behavior; later in attitude.

Suppose you establish a new house rule: All chores and duties (including schoolwork) must be satisfactorily completed before any

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privileges begin. Your son—once he comes to believe this new you is really you and not some alien life force controlling his mother's body—most likely will start to comply within weeks, even days, but only because he is feeling forced to and only because it is in his own self-interest.

For a while your son will be more convinced than ever that you are unreasonable, dictatorial or arbitrary—and these are your good qualities. Such is to be expected. Actions can be changed much more quickly than minds. Many of your son's wrongheaded views are years old. You aren't going to right them in two months.

When will his attitude start to improve? I don't know (I get paid for this). But I do know that if you persevere through his resistance,

Stepford Child compliance may eventually become respectful cooperation. That is your ultimate goal.

There are other critical reasons to reverse your parenting, even if it seems late. And their number corresponds exactly to the number of younger brothers and sisters. They see what trails you are blazing with Big Brother. You didn't mention other siblings, but if they are there, they are watching you closely. Change those trails now, and you will change theirs too. And then "Is it too late?" won't need to be asked again.

Reversing Directions

Dear Dr. Ray,

Having realized that I've been a lax disciplinarian for years, should I change all at once or gradually?

Coming to My Senses

Change all at once. That's the best way. Alas, in so doing, you will change only gradually. Even trying with all your might, it's nearly impossible to change quickly and fully. Your parenting style and habits have the momentum of several years. Suddenly slamming on the brakes and reversing engines won't result in an immediate 180-degree turnabout. Most likely you'll skid for a while, inch to a halt and then slowly reverse directions.

Turning around a large ship in the ocean takes up to twelve miles. And that's a ship without kids. You're not the size of a ship, but you're far more complex. Altering a ship's course is child's play compared to altering a parenting course.

Nevertheless, you need to begin changing your ways right now and with full speed ahead. First, the longer you delay, the longer bad habits

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have to further harden. Breaking bad habits a little at a time is like trying to quit smoking a little at a time. You're struggling to conquer the same behavior in which you keep indulging.

Second, changing gradually leads to changing erratically. Let's say you prioritize your list of trouble. This month you'll tackle the majors: back talk, defiance and sibling quibbling. Next month you'll move on to clothes debris, phone time and chores. What if you're still getting resistance in the big three at the end of the month? Do you allot another month, thus still ignoring the "minor" issues? And when is a problem conquered? At 50 percent less? 75 percent? In fact, most misbehavior never completely goes away. So if you wait until one problem is all gone, you'll never move on to any others.

Third, the faces of misconduct overlap. For example, back talk and defiance may be intertwined with phone trouble. Sibling quibbling can lead to chore hassles and vice versa. You can't deal effectively with one without simultaneously dealing with the others.

Fourth, bad stuff needs to be stopped now. When you sense you're drinking spoiled milk, do you slow your rate of swallowing or spit it out? If your child were doing something harmful, would you allow him three months to give it up? One of the greater human blessings is self-awareness. Once we realize we're heading in the wrong direction, we can exert all our will to change course if we so choose.

So how will your kids react to the new you? They'll be shell-shocked. Who is this stranger? What kind of junk has she been reading? How long is this going to last until we get back to normal?

Kids don't generally realize what is good for them, so they resist it. That's all right. Shortly they'll come to accept the fact that this stronger parent is here to stay and will only get stronger with time. And gradually they'll change, too, into more mature human beings who'll learn to appreciate the way things have changed.

Pendulum Parenting

Dear Dr. Ray,

As a teenager I experienced harsh and erratic discipline. I'm so afraid of doing the same to my kids (ages fourteen and fifteen) that I tend toward being permissive and lax.

Overcompensator

The opposite of harsh is not permissive; it is lovingly strong. The opposite of erratic is not lax; it is consistent.

The drive to parent opposite from any hurtful ways you were raised is a common and powerful one. In part this is because emotional reactions of years ago may linger today. They can evoke potent memories of feeling misunderstood and mistreated. Consequently, to make sure that you don't provoke the same feelings in your kids, you scrupulously seek to avoid disagreements or conflict. The primary goal of your parenting is peace, even when your better judgment says to stand your ground in the face of resistance.

There are two unavoidable traps lurking in this parenting style. One, it is not possible to avoid upsetting kids. The very reality of socializing a child means you must make many decisions—good ones—that they will find disagreeable, unfair, arbitrary or “mean.” And yes, at times they may even believe *you* are disagreeable, unfair, arbitrary or “mean.” You must be ready to “cause” in your children some *temporary*—that is the key word—feelings of being misunderstood or mistreated. Otherwise you pretty much must let them decide for themselves how to run their own lives, even at ages fourteen and fifteen.

Herein lies trap number two. Even if you can sidestep conflict for the moment, over time you will only cause more conflict. Quite simply, you never can parent in a way your kids will always find fair and agreeable. In due course, more and more of your decisions, no matter how compromising, will anger them.

Why? Because Core Law of Human Nature Number 103 says that you can't satisfy consistently other people—big or little—by giving in to their every desire. They will become only harder to please, trickier to get along with and more demanding. They will become more easily reactive to the slightest whiff that you are not doing things their way.

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The final irony? The very thing you so desperately want to avoid—a harsh and erratic relationship with your children—you risk creating. They don't appreciate your parenting looseness, as they've come to want more and more looseness in order to be pacified. At the same time you fight feelings of frustration and impotence, as no matter how much you try to see things their way, you never get credit for it.

So how do you avoid this spiraling cycle?

First, drive this notion into your head: The opposite of harsh parenting is strong parenting. It is calm, loving resolve. To be firm in your decisions is not in the least mean or dictatorial. It is doing well by your children—now and in the future.

Second, your kids' unreasonable reaction to your limits and rules is not an automatic indicator that you are being unreasonable. There is a huge difference between unfair discipline and discipline that kids might think is unfair. In loving homes a teen's bad reactions to rules are not usually a reliable indicator that the rules are bad.

Finally, consider this. In all likelihood your parents didn't give much thought to their approach and its effect on you. They did what they did, for better or worse. The fact that you are so concerned about your behavior reflects a desire to be a good parent. In and of itself, this is pretty good evidence that your style is not harsh or erratic. Indeed, one way to be harsh is to be so afraid of doing so that you don't allow yourself to be strong and consistent.

It's Only a Stage

Dear Dr. Ray,

I've recently realized that I need to take a firmer discipline stand with my kids, but they don't seem to be taking me seriously. It's as though they're just waiting for me to go back to my old self.

A New Woman, Really

They are. Kids are natural-born skeptics, at least where discipline is concerned. They will settle for nothing less than time and consistency from us before being convinced that our new resolve is for real.

Wise parents make adjustments, sometimes big ones. Routinely a mother or father will call me, spurred on by the realization that “something has to change” in the home. The kids have become the heads of the household, and the parents are hostages to increasing misbehavior. (Is “misbehavior” a politically incorrect child-rearing term? I think I hear an expert somewhere intoning, “There is no misbehavior, only misunderstood behavior.”)

Generally, the younger a child when a parent decides that limits are also love, the shorter and less bumpy the road back to a parent-centered household. All too sadly, many parents need ten to fifteen years of increasingly being abused to conclude that they've let their authority slip away. Then life becomes the child's dominant parent, teaching lessons far more roughly than moms and dads do, even in our firmest discipline moments.

I wholeheartedly applaud your insight, and you didn't even have to pay some therapist big bucks for it. Now you have two

hurdles ahead of you. One, to maintain, hopefully build upon, your newfound determination. And two, to convince your kids this reborn

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mother is just the beginning. Fortunately, if you do the first, the second will take care of itself.

As you've seen, initially kids aren't inclined to take the new you seriously. "What is this? Did you see some shrink on *Oprah* today, Mom?" "Did you go buy some new parenting book?" Parents often tell me, after seeing me a few times, that their kids are asking, "Who have you been talking to?"

Come to think of it, the kids are insulting us. The implication is that we aren't capable of changing ourselves on our own. There must be some hidden influence somewhere prodding us to be more self-assured, and once that's gone, our spines will return to Styrofoam.

You could play with your kids' heads a bit. Tape a copy of this page to the refrigerator. They'll think it's the source of your strength. Most likely it will mysteriously disappear. Tape up another, knowing it too will be swiped in a few days. Whereupon your kids will settle back, confident that your phase is about to pass now that the shrink has been eliminated, only to find with time that your resolve is internal and not taped to a door. They've learned a lesson about doubting their mother.

In a way, who can blame kids for being skeptical about discipline changes? Almost on a weekly basis, parents "have had it up to here" and resolve that "there are going to be some changes around here, young man." Then Bruno knows to lower his unruly profile a while until we get back to status quo. The effect of this cycle is that we lose a little credibility each time we enter it and don't live it through. So when you've finally, really, truly, actually had enough, you'd better be prepared to prove it for a long time—in fact, for the rest of their childhood.

The relationship is simple: If you keep your resolve, the kids will believe. If you think it'll help, you could tell them, "You know, you guys are right. This is a phase I'm going through. It will be about fifteen years long."

The Authority Test

Dear Dr. Ray,

I used to think I was a pretty strong parent, but I'm beginning to wonder. As my children have gotten older, they're resisting my discipline with more intensity.

Shaky Mom

Want a simple test of parental authority? Next time your child does something wrong or bad—wait, I must briefly digress.

Can we still use words like *bad* or *wrong* in our value-neutral culture? Must we morally antisepticize the language, as some experts assert? “Blade, putting the ice pick in your sister’s foot is inappropriate conduct.” No, it’s real bad conduct. Just ask his sister.

So when your youngster next acts badly or wrongly, set up a field experiment. In an even tone of voice, one time, levy a consequence: “Eve, you are being very disrespectful. Head for your room; your night is over.” “I asked you three times to clean the bathroom, Hazel. You ignored me all three times. You now have two hours of labor. Let’s begin immediately.” “Webster, you will write a four-hundred-word apology to your teacher for getting a detention in her class.” “Because you called your little brother a name, Oral, you will give him two dollars.”

Once only, calmly, discipline. Then step back and observe what happens. Is there cooperation? a look of disbelief? relentless negotiation and defense? an outright argument? a look saying, “I’ll comply, but you and everybody else will pay for the next six hours”? a fit? stomping? more misbehavior? leaving the time-out corner twenty-six times? a posture that says, “You and what army?”

Put simply, how does your child react? In large measure this will tell you how he views your authority. I am convinced that a child’s response when disciplined is more affected by his perception of his parent than by his temperament.

Routinely parents call children strong-willed who are not. Their conduct is emboldened by their perception of Mom or Dad as weak-willed. In essence, the more a youngster believes that our discipline is questionable or challengeable, the stronger will be his resistance to it.

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So how do parents overall score on the authority test? As a discipline teacher for over twenty-five years, my results say that the average American parent with the average American child does not get cooperation without resistance, ranging from verbal to physical. If by nature Butkus has always been easy or mature or compliant, then he usually cooperates with discipline on his own. But if he is normal-natured or stronger, getting resistance is more common than acceptance for most moms and dads.

So how did *you* do? What did your kids do? There is good news and bad news. The bad news: if the kids resisted, in word or deed, you can conclude pretty safely that they don't see you as having confident, legitimate authority. The good news: You can change this perception if you change you.

I believe without a doubt that a generation or two ago, more parents passed the test. Why? Again, perception. Kids viewed parents—indeed, most grown-ups—as having legitimate authority. That's because the grown-ups also viewed themselves that way and acted accordingly. The irony is that if a parent has authority in a child's mind, she doesn't have to assert it very often; it's a given. If she doesn't have authority in the child's mind, she is always trying to assert some weak form of it, usually with words or emotion.

So what can parents do to change a child's perception and slowly reestablish themselves as the resolute, loving leaders of their home? Allow this story about my wife to illustrate.