

## Keep on Persevering

*Dear Dr. Ray,*

*Though most experts emphasize the importance of consistency in good discipline, I've heard you talk about perseverance as well. Is it just as important?*

*Hanging in There*

The value of perseverance depends solely on one question: Perseverance in what? Perseverance in nagging, reminding, cajoling, pleading, overreasoning, threatening, and emotional assaults is worse than worthless. It is counterproductive. It simply prolongs bad discipline habits that will teach Constance to persevere in ignoring or defying us. Excess words are the illusion of real discipline, so perseverance in talk leads mostly to frustration, for both parents and kids.

In short, when it comes to discipline, perseverance in mere words is bad.

Perseverance is good—indeed, it's of the highest value—when its partner is consistency as we have defined it: reliably placing consequences upon misconduct. In that case, then perseverance is consistency over time, sometimes a very long time. Perseverance is the willingness to do what it takes for as long as it takes to teach the desired lesson.

Let's say that talking on the phone is a challenge for you, not because you're socially awkward, but because your kids are like Pavlov's dogs. The bell rings, and they get rude, rowdy, and interrupt so much so that you salivate in anger. Enough of this, you've decided.

"Alexander, Belle, we have a new house rule. When I am on

the phone, you will be respectful. If not I will calmly excuse myself from the call, then escort you to your rooms for the rest of the call and maybe then some. Please don't resist, get louder, or come out. You'll be grounded for the day if you do."

How long will you have to persevere in enforcing your rule before you get peace on the phone? Twenty-five calls? Fifty-five calls? Two hundred and fifty-five calls? I really can't predict. And at one level the number is not relevant. Your goal is to do what you said. In time (2023?) your kids win learn to cooperate.

Routinely I tell my clients, "One of the easiest parts of parent counseling is giving you ideas. I can give you many discipline ideas for any one problem. What I can't give you is the will to persevere. That is the crucial ingredient in seeing positive change." A simple approach used consistently and with stick-to-it-iveness almost always works better than the most brilliant approach tried erratically or briefly.

Let's get back on the phone for a minute. Good, durable discipline will keep the following from happening.

*Rriinnnggg.*

"Oh, hello, Deacon ... Well of course, we would be flattered to be the role model family for the church-children love-in ... (Glaring at the brawling children.) Deacon, could you please excuse me for one minute? I'm going to have a little love chat with the children. Oh yes, they're precious blessings from God ... Why certainly, after I encourage them, I'll get them on the phone to hear the good news, too ..."

With mouthpiece covered, teeth gritted, a guttural growl is

aimed at Alexander and Belle: “Get away from each other, you little brats. When I get off this phone, you’ll both be sorry you got out of bed this morning. I mean it, you are both toast.”

Drawn back to the phone now. “What’s that, Deacon? No, that’s the neighbor lady. She always talks to her children that way. Yes, we will pray for her; she needs prayers ... We have moved, but she keeps finding us!”

Perseverance in real discipline—calm, resolute action—leads to less discipline. Perseverance in fake discipline—lots of words powered by emotions—leads to more discipline. Perseverance is only valuable in pursuit of real discipline.

## Changing Our Minds: A Parent’s Prerogative

*Dear Dr. Ray,*

*Is it appropriate to change your mind about your discipline, or would that be inconsistent?*

*Reconsidering*

I used to think so, but I’ve since changed my mind. By “change your mind,” I assume you mean, after the heat of a discipline moment has passed, to have second thoughts about your decision, or style, or both. That’s what most parents mean.

Let’s say Barney has just tormented his brother, Andy, for the umpteenth time today. In a fit of frustration, you levy a heavy fine: “I don’t want either of you breathing within a mile of each other for two days, and if you do, you’ll be grounded for a week.”

Two hours later, Barney's in bed, asleep, looking cherubic, and you're calm, wondering how to get out of the corner you painted yourself into without looking wishy-washy or inconsistent.

First of all, it is neither weak nor inconsistent to reconsider logically a decision made during a burst of emotion. If later you conclude a lesser punishment would better fit the crime, this is not backtracking. Let's call it reassessing based upon—and this is key—a clearer perspective. Discipline will still hap-

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pen, only in a more measured way.

Second, if you've laid down a pretty foolish law, such as “no contact within a one-mile radius,” you'll look even more foolish trying to enforce the unenforceable. Unless your house is absolutely enormous, or really tall, your discipline is pure fiction. Better to cut your losses, salvage your credibility, and tell them you meant “within a yard” of each other.

There's still a consequence, only now it's realistic. Kids love to push us to wild overstatement, and then watch us wriggle around on our own words.

Then, too, sometimes logistics dictate a discipline turn. A one-week grounding may burden you more than them. Figure out something else to substitute. Your discipline is still in force; the consequences have been changed to protect the innocent—you.

Third, be ready to apologize for verbal or emotional overkill. Your discipline itself may have been right on target,

but your style was rough. You got personal or off the real point. It is never wrong to admit your own misbehavior. It's mature, even merciful. Admitting your own childishness can help your kids grow up.

Finally, real inconsistency in discipline comes from a pattern of poor follow-through due to laziness, guilt, fear of disapproval, weakness of will, or fatigue from being badgered. In other words, inconsistency arises from all the wrong reasons. It is not inconsistent to correct or tinker with a decision, provided you're not doing so out of a misguided sense of self-doubt.

For that reason, be open to a change of mind when you, through calm deliberation, determine it's called for. You will neither lose credibility nor send your kids the wrong message. Indeed, I think you'll rise in their eyes. They'll know that you're willing to think things over because *you* think it's warranted, not because *they* do.

## Misbehavior and Misbeliefs

*Dear Dr. Ray,*

*Staying calm is one of the hardest things for me to do when I discipline. How can I keep my cool?*

*Little Cool Left*

Calm and discipline—two words that aren't often found in the same sentence for most of us parents. Not that we don't try to discipline calmly. It's just incredibly difficult, especially when the object of our discipline is a child, and not something

**Not that we don't try to discipline calmly. It's just incredibly difficult, especially when the object of our discipline is a child, and not something easy, like a timber wolf.**

easy, like a timber wolf. Complete calm during all discipline moments is unattainable, but it is a goal to work toward, for several reasons.

One, the more upset we get, the more likely our kids will act the same. (Did you ever notice how much more quickly kids imitate our bad habits than our good ones?) With everybody mad at everybody, things get said that aren't meant, and any real discipline rapidly gets lost in the emotional storm.

Two, our anger conveys a false message to our youngsters: "I am responsible for your behavior, not *you*." It was young Forbes who stomped away from the family's monthly Monopoly game after landing on his sister-owned Boardwalk, but we're the ones who get most upset about his conduct.

Three, kids draw energy from their parents' anger. It gives them power over us. They act bad and we get mad.

When I was about six or seven years old, my mother's emotions would nearly reach hurricane force before she finally put me in my room. My attitude was "OK, Mom, I'll do my fifteen minutes; I ruined your day." Sometimes it's worth being punished just for the chance to get the folks so agitated.

When kids act up, parents often make themselves feel worse by misinterpreting the behavior. Here are three of the most common misbeliefs about misbehavior.

1. *My youngster's behavior is a reflection of my parenting.* Not necessarily so. Kids, being human beings—well, most of the time—act through their own wills.

You might be Parent of the Decade in the Western Hemisphere, but Igor can still work to make you lose the title. Why? Because he's a kid, and by his nature he is impulsive, childish, and shortsighted.

As a parent, you can respond to misconduct, but you can't totally prevent it. The ultimate responsibility lies with Igor. You provide the choices and consequences. He makes the decisions.

2. *This behavior is directed at me personally.* I don't say this to make you feel neglected, but most kids aren't even thinking about their parents when they're acting up. They may be forced to think about us after the fact, as they're straining to concoct some reason for wandering in at 1:15 A.M. or for not being at the library as promised, but immediately prior to their impulsive moves, they're not giving our feelings much thought.

If they were considering how we'd react, they'd be less likely to test us, wouldn't they? Kids are kids (we psychologist types are trained to say profound things) and their kiddish conduct is most often aimed at getting them what they want—not at us. If they upset us in the process, that's just a bonus.

3. *This behavior is a sign of things to come.* Rob has just stolen a match box Corvette from the store. Does this mean he will steal a real Corvette fourteen years from now? Absolutely not.

It is psychologically impossible to predict the future of a child based on one, two, or even several incidents of misconduct. This misbelief can torment parents more than any other. How can we calmly deal with a here-and-now incident of petty thievery when inside our own psyche all manner of "What if?" and "What does this mean?" questions are swirling around.

Always remind yourself that no one except God can know what any given behavior will lead to years from now. What's more, most misbehavior means *nothing* for the future. It is *right now* misconduct that must be handled *right now*. Peering ahead to guess about the long-term ramifications of some disturbing incident will only make you feel needlessly frightened and guilty.

There is a bright side to losing your cool. Anger is like a spice. If not overused, it can add memorable flavor to your discipline. Your kids will realize that when you do get angry, you're in no mood to mess around.

## Lengthening Your Fuse

*Dear Dr. Ray,*

*I've heard that we shouldn't discipline our children when we're angry. How can I do that? I find myself becoming more easily frustrated with my sons, ages nine and thirteen.*

*Trip Switch*

Parents face a lot of subtle pressure these days to practice 100 percent anger-free child rearing. Resist the pressure. It can't be done.

No parent disciplines without getting angry sometimes. I do recall one mom who was determined to stay calm from day one of motherhood. She was eventually hospitalized with an ulcer, but her sixteen-month-old was allowed to visit her.

Anytime your emotions are wrapped tightly around another

human being, you will do emotional things, such as saying words you don't really mean, losing control, and yelling. Emotions, even negative ones, are signs of close involvement.

This said, most of us admit we could do a calmer job of child raising, disciplining in particular. Your question has many answers. For now, let's focus on one attitude crucial to calmer discipline.

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Consider the parenting debut. On day one, we are blessed with a being with zero social skills. It is completely self-centered. It wants what it wants the second it wants it, becoming a raving emotional lunatic if it doesn't get it. Over the better part of the following two decades we strive to permeate this child with self-control, maturity, and morals. In the meantime we face thousands upon thousands of episodes of resistant, obnoxious, difficult, thoughtless, moody, selfish behavior.

This isn't an overly negative picture. It's reality. It's childhood. And lest you think that "thousands upon thousands" is an overstatement, consider that even if a youngster were to misbehave only once per day (let me study such a child!) in sixteen years the total misbehaviors would be more than five thousand.

The more we understand and accept this fact of child rearing, the better we'll be able to confront it when it presents itself daily, even hourly or minutely.

A great definition of stress says that stress is the difference

between the way we'd like things to be and the way that they are. To the degree that we expect a Hallmark card family scene with an ever-cooperative and grateful little Chastity and Oxford walking with us, we will be frustrated and wonder, "What's wrong?" The truth is that when kids misbehave, most of the time there's *nothing* wrong. They're being kids, and they're forcing us to be parents.

**To keep frustration lower, act quicker.**

Once we have realistic expectations, we need a few techniques to lengthen our fuse. Here they are:

*Technique #1.* Act early in the chain. An all-too-typical disciplinary scene unfolds this way:

Butkus ignores, defies, or debates parent. Parent repeats him- or herself, prods, argues, threatens. Butkus resists further, talks tougher, escalates. Parent stands ground, gets upset, disciplines.

The whole scenario takes twenty-seven minutes to intensify. By the time the parent finally disciplines, the misbehavior has multiplied, words have clashed, emotions have fumed. Who wouldn't be frustrated at this point?

Don't allow the exchange to get on a roll. Discipline early, when it is warranted and while you're still calm. Believe it or not, Butkus will more quietly accept his discipline. To keep frustration lower, act quicker.

*Technique #2.* Get out of each other's faces. As soon as you feel your temperature rise a few degrees, send Butkus to his room before you act rashly, or you go to yours. The situation will still be dealt with, only later when you're back to 98.6°. Distance is a great sedative. It helps clear minds, stabilize reasoning, and soften words.