

CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN - THE POWER OF PLAY

A Playful Approach to Discipline (Part One)

by Dr. Gordon Neufeld, Used with Permission.

The Neufeld Institute first published this article on the root causes of problem behavior and their surprisingly playful solutions in April 2016 as a two-part editorial.

Play has been on my mind lately. Perhaps it is the influence of three young grandsons. Perhaps it is because I want to stay young, and playfulness definitely helps with that. Perhaps it is because the subject of play has been exploding into scientific consciousness lately and I had the wonderful luxury of creating Play & Emotion, a new course that has given me one of the best times of my theoretical life. Whatever the reasons, I think I have become a believer in play.

One doesn't usually associate the constructs of play and discipline. There is good reason for this. Discipline is usually associated with the work motif which is all about outcomes. The fundamental theory of work as applied to discipline holds that behavior is shaped by its consequences. It follows then that the primary challenge in discipline would be to control the outcome of a child's behavior. So when problem behavior occurs, believers in the work motif are thinking "What outcomes should I arrange or impose to give the child the message that this behavior does not work?". Or when the child is doing something that particularly pleases us "What outcomes (e.g. rewards) should we give to send the message that this behavior works?" .

Play, on the other hand, is not about outcomes but about the activity itself. In this way, play is the opposite of work. To be playful means that we are engaged by the activity, not thinking about the outcomes that could result.

Believers in the work motif assume that children should be treated as little workers so that they will eventually learn to link cause and effect and gradually come to modify their own behavior accordingly. When taking this approach, discipline itself becomes hard work, attempting to find just the right kind of outcomes to produce the right kind of behavior.

There are two fundamental problems with approaching discipline in this way. Firstly, children specifically, and the immature more generally, don't function according to the work motif. It doesn't matter how logical the consequences may be when a child isn't thinking in terms of outcomes. To not fully appreciate this fact can make one feel crazy at times and render discipline an exercise in futility. For sound developmental reasons we are now just beginning to discover, children are designed to function in the play mode, legitimately blind to the outcome of their behavior.

The second problem with viewing discipline in the work motif is that work doesn't actually deliver the kind of behavioral outcomes we are looking for. The basic reason for this is that discipline cannot address the underlying issues that give rise to the problem behavior. We often think of discipline as being corrective, but that could only be true if the problem behavior did not have deeper roots. It turns out that there are five root problems that underlie almost all the behavior that is typically subjected to discipline. And discipline does not provide a solution to even one of them.

Causes for Problem Behavior

Immaturity

The most common reason for problem behavior is immaturity. Children are not born with the ability to solve problems, take another's perspective, judge outcomes, or manage their emotions and impulses. Even when knowing right from wrong, they are often unable to deliver. Even their best intentions will too often go unrealized. Although these developmental deficits lead to considerable problem behavior, they cannot be corrected through discipline. Only true maturation will provide the outcomes we desire. In the meantime, we should consider what to do with a child until mature enough to act according to their knowledge.

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Lack of right relationship with adult

A second major cause of problem behavior is a lack of right relationship with the adult in charge. Children must be deeply attached and in a state of trustful dependence in order to have a deep and systemic desire to be good. When this attachment is lacking, children will instinctually resist and oppose when they feel coerced. The term for this is counterwill. This kind of problem behavior cannot be addressed through discipline; in fact, discipline will make it worse. The appropriate question to ask is how to develop the kind of relationship in which children naturally want to be good. If that underlying desire was there and we made sure to safeguard this sacred trust, there would certainly be less need for discipline.

Strong emotional impulse

The third underlying reason for a significant portion of problem behavior is children's strong emotional impulses, which seek release. All discipline does is aggravate the very emotions that are getting a child into trouble in the first place. When we sense that emotion is driving behavior, we should ask ourselves how we can help the child get this emotion out without getting into trouble. An understanding of this dynamic alone would change our own behavior considerably.

The child is not being instinctively moved to be cautious, careful and concerned

The fourth reason for problem behavior is that a child is not being instinctively moved to be cautious, careful and concerned when they should be. These attributes are not personality characteristics to be taught but rather the fruit of a healthy alarm system. For children to stay out of trouble and out of harm's way, their thinking brains need to feel the feedback of an activated alarm system when trouble looms ahead. Too many of our children have lost their ability to feel cautious, careful and concerned, and so they become discipline problems by default. The question we should be asking ourselves in cases like this is how to help restore the child's capacity to feel cautious and careful when this is called for.

If these four root causes of problem behavior were resolved, there would be very little need to discipline a child. We must remind ourselves that discipline itself cannot correct the root issues that underlie most problem behavior. In fact, conventional discipline tends to make matters worse. If this were truly understood, we would know that the real challenge in discipline is not to make headway or to teach a child a lesson, but rather to 'do no harm' and to find a way of dealing with the symptom behavior until the underlying issues could be addressed. This insight would fundamentally change the way we interact with our children, and not only when problem behavior occurs.