

## *Discipline:* **To teach or to control?**

***How do I manage the behavior of my child?***

***How do I make them listen and respond appropriately?***

***What do I do NOW?***

**T**hese are the questions Early Educators hear most often from parents, and believe it or not ask themselves most often. Discipline is a hot training topic for all involved in the care and education of young children.

And indeed there are no magic answers or the book would have been written long ago. However, good guidelines are worth reviewing. First, the word DISCIPLINE means TO TEACH. Discipline is a method of teaching behavior. Punishment is a whole different approach that has proven to have limited if not negative results with young children.

Teaching behavior begins with knowing your child. When a growing child shows us new skills that may not be socially acceptable or a child's behavior becomes difficult we should begin by asking WHY. What has changed in the child or the child's life? This is a time to observe and describe the behavior by eliminating the negative labels such as aggressive or difficult. This is a time to take an objective and global view of the child's changing world and ask yourself some questions. Has the child's family life undergone a recent change. Has his/her schedule recently changed or has his/her environment changed. Consider if you or your spouse has changed schedules as well. Each of these aspects of a child's life can have a deep effect on behavior. Each issue can be examined and manipulated by a sensitive adult to benefit both the child and those who interact with him/her daily.

When we begin to see the pattern that the behavior follows we gain an understanding of what is causing the change. For example; transitions from one activity to another is a typical time for a breakdown in the normal behavior of a child. Children do not like to stop and move on to the next agenda item. Not many of us do. Giving the child extra time and verbal preparation

allows them to experience the power they can have in managing their own lives.

Behavior difficulties often arise around a power struggle. As children grow they acquire more skills and seek to control their new world. We want them to experience this power and to build their own self-efficiency as well as self-discipline. If we expect that a child is capable of this growth we have made a giant step toward success. The assumption that children are capable and have the skills to manage their world is basic to effective discipline. As in any successful relationship the foundation of child/adult interaction is trust and respect.

The adult role is to be the observer and the guardian in the relationship. Adults must keep children safe from potential danger, however, they do not need to direct every action or activity. Adults model and facilitate good behavior and set safe limits just as good teachers do. Adults take away from the learning by imposing undue control and metering punishment.

Behavior management is complicated by the emotional reactions it creates. We as adults may get upset when a child does something that we consider a challenging behavior. A child's actions and a child's tears go deep into our emotional center. That is why remembering to question the WHY of behavior, trying to understand the behavior can calm the waters and lead to a more thoughtful, effective and loving response. Keeping the partnership of parent and child as the primary focus allows the bumps and imbalances in challenging behavior to be navigated. Children need holding and guidance along with freedom and respect. This is an awesome test of our ability as parents and adults to balance these ongoing and complex elements of our relationship with our children.

*Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensure that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; building public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family. [www.earlylearningnh.org](http://www.earlylearningnh.org)*