

## **Creative Discipline in a Chaotic World\***

by Wray Pascoe

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Child care professionals have a chance to influence children for the rest of their lives. Some of the most difficult children may make you wonder why you chose this line of work, but they may be the children upon whom you will have the greatest impact. You may be the only person who treats them with respect, who encourages them and who sets appropriate limits. You may be one of only a few consistent, predictable and rational people in their lives.

Not very long ago, children were supposed to be “seen and not heard.” However, children now appear to dominate. As a clinician, I see many parents who do not know what is acceptable behaviour for their children and what is not, or what can be tolerated at home but not in public. I see many parents making excuses for their children’s behaviour.

Child care professionals across Canada have told me that children sometimes enter their centre screaming abusively at a parent and the parent seems at a loss what to do with the child. After the parent leaves, the child stops the tantrum, settling in with his/her friends. Why? The child understands the expectations of child care staff whose rules and boundaries are clear and enforced.

Many parents do not know what is acceptable behaviour and what is not.

### **Children Need LSD**

In this case, LSD is not a hallucinogen but rather stands for Love, Structure and Discipline. Parents and child care staff need to be able nurture each child in a safe and loving environment, accepting each child as unique, with wants, needs and feelings separate and sometimes very divergent from their own. Children need opportunities that ensure success. Failures need to be understood as opportunities to learn and change. Praise and reinforcement of positive behaviours lead to growth and enhanced self-esteem. But enforced limits, boundaries and rules need to be the bedrock of all endeavours.

### **Why Do Children Need Limits?**

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Jane Goodall, internationally recognized for her work with African chimps, postulated that the “best” chimp mothers had good mothers themselves; mothers who were playful with their offspring, mothers who were not over-protective, and mothers who intervened when a behaviour was dangerous or unacceptable. The goal seems to be independence within the boundaries of the social group.

All children have primitive thoughts and urges. But what should you do when a child acts on them? I believe that children, like chimps, need to learn what behaviours are dangerous or unacceptable. I believe that children become afraid when the significant adults in their life cannot or do not control them; children are afraid that they will not be able to control their own urges and behaviours. Conversely, when children know that adults are able to control them, they learn that they can control themselves.

### **Family of Origin**

To a great extent, your family of origin influences your feelings about limit-setting and deciding what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, and when. In choosing your approach, it is important to think about what you want to do differently from your parents and what you want to do the same. What were the rules and expectations in your family? How were they enforced? Adults need to think about these strategies and whether they were effective. For example, physical punishment, fear and intimidation do achieve immediate compliance, but over time they are ineffective and damaging. Indeed, I am convinced that verbal attacks on the child or ongoing denigration are more devastating than physical abuse; attacks on a child’s self-esteem last a lifetime.

### **Fear and Guilt**

Fear and guilt are two of the most destructive emotions to healthy individuals but they are frequently used as methods to control children’s behaviour. Fear of dangerous or unsafe situations or people can be useful, but fear is not an effective tool for discipline. Many parents feel guilty when they use child care services for their children and (mistakenly) consider this choice inferior to parent care in the home.

Young children quickly learn to manipulate their parents’ fear and guilt and sometimes that of child care staff. Think of the children being dropped off at a centre, pleading with their parents not to leave them as they are “lonely” or “afraid” to be without their



parents. This can arouse guilt on the part of the parent, who promises the child a toy or some other privilege. This same child exhibits no concern once the parent is out of sight, but will almost certainly collect later on the promise.

Children capitalize on fear and/or guilt when children tell the parents/caregivers that they are no longer loved or that they are “bad” mothers/fathers/caregivers. A child’s feelings need to be acknowledged: “You may be angry with me/not love me right now, but I love you and you will pick up your toys.” A suitable reply to a child who calls a parent/caregiver “bad” could be: “No, I am a good mother/father/caregiver and you will do as I tell you.” The child’s frequent reply, “You can’t make me!” needs to be followed by, “Would you like to see if I can?” Be prepared to enforce your decision.

### **Giving Children Missing Words**

Language is a tool that everyone needs to communicate their needs and to express their feelings. Our bodies act out when we can’t access words for how we feel or for what we need. Young children have a limited vocabulary for emotions but they recognize when they are mad. But anger is an emotion that covers other feelings. When we are angry, we might also feel vulnerable, embarrassed, hurt or frustrated. We all need many more “feeling” words than mad and sad.

### **Angry Children**

Anger is a common response to frustration or hurt. Children need help both expressing anger and handling it appropriately. Young children often have difficulty expressing their needs or dealing with disappointment. For example, many children want to participate, but are too tired or too “little” to accomplish a task. In situations when a child is frustrated, adults may take over instead of asking how they can help.

Anyone who deals with children needs to be prepared to deal with anger and rejection. However, striking an adult is never acceptable. Some adults find it amusing when a child’s anger leads him/her to try to physically injure the adult. Parents have told me that this does not hurt or that the child does not mean anything. I disagree. The child is angry and, at that moment, does what s/he can to inflict damage on the adult. However, the illusion that it is acceptable to strike an adult or that they are capable of inflicting harm on an adult damages the child: it gives the child a false sense of power and entitlement, and leads to feelings of

insecurity.

### **Out of Control Children**

In a child care setting, children who are out of control take about five times more staff attention than compliant children. Fights with other children or refusal to respect the rules of the classroom are typical behaviours. Children may blame others or launch into elaborate excuses. They can be very self-centred, disregarding the rights and feelings of other children. Safety for the child and for others in the center needs to be the paramount consideration in determining what actions need to be taken.

A child may need to be removed until s/he regains control. This allows the staff to encourage the child to verbalize the feelings that led to be the behaviour and to explore acceptable alternatives to resolve the difficulty. Other behaviours that cause concern to staff include cheating, stealing, lying and being disruptive. Staff need to determine whether it is simply a difficult moment for the child or if something is occurring at home that is placing excessive stress on the child.

Unfortunately, parents do not always inform child care staff when a family is facing divorce, when a parent has become unemployed or when a grandparent has died. If a child's behaviour is out of character, the questions to ask are, "Why now? And why this behaviour?" All behaviour has purpose. Our job is to determine what the child is trying to tell us with this behaviour.

Physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abandonment in the home need to be considered. Remember, all professionals are required by law to report suspected abuse. Follow-up a telephone call with a letter, so you have a record of your actions. Child welfare authorities may have heavy workloads, but your first responsibility is to the child and the child care centre.

### **Other Problem Behaviours**

*Parenting* magazine's May 1998 article, "Help your kids break bad habits" listed negative behaviours of girls as hair pulling, thumb sucking and teeth grinding. Bad habits of boys were nose picking, nail biting, lip licking and masturbation. The author clearly never spent time in a child care facility! These "seven deadly sins" of childhood are exhibited by both girls and boys. Many are transitory and/or are responses to stress. Again, we need to determine what purpose the behaviour serves and what needs of the child are not being met. The child needs to know the

difference between “public” and “private” behaviours.

### **Principles of Effective Discipline**

There are hundreds of ways to support positive and appropriate behaviours. Good animal trainers know that affection and praise in the context of respect are the most effective methods to obtain desired results. Punishment or fear are deterrents to positive learning. Positive regard for authority is critical.

Time out, such as sitting on a chair removed from others — never more than five minutes — is one common method of dealing with unacceptable behaviours. We are social animals and being ignored is a punishment and deterrent.

Many parents, and even a few child care providers, think that a spanking or a “smack” on the bottom is effective and causes no harm. I disagree from both a clinical and an ethical viewpoint. Corporal punishment is never acceptable.

I believe that the principles that underlie effective discipline are what I call the three Rs of logical consequences. When discipline is unrelated, disrespectful or unreasonable, get ready to be visited by the four Rs of consequences/punishment.

### **Three Rs of Logical Consequences**

Children need to learn as soon as possible that there are consequences to their behaviour and actions.

However, try to ensure that consequences are:

1. *Related* — choose consequences that are related to the child’s behaviour
2. *Respectful* — the child is not blamed or shamed for his/her behaviour
3. *Reasonable* — reasonable consequences, from the child’s point of view.

If any of the above three Rs are missing, for example if a child feels unfairly punished with unreasonable consequences, the child is likely to present with any or all of the following Four Rs of Consequences/Punishment:

1. *Revenge* — I’ll get even with you
2. *Rebellion* — I won’t do it your way
3. *Resentment* — I don’t trust you
4. *Retreat* — I’m a bad person (reduces self-esteem)

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### **Communication Patterns**

Negative communications include nagging, criticizing, interrupting, threatening and sarcasm. These tend to be neither heard nor followed. Instead, they lead to resentment. In contrast, words of praise and encouragement are always welcome. No one ever tires of being told that they are doing a good job. The following positive phrases\* can be used in any setting:

That's great!

Terrific!

You can do it!

You've got it!

Fantastic!

You're the best!

Nice going!

Way to go!

Good work!

Outstanding!

Good for you!

Great!

You've figured it out!

Nice work!

Super!

You're right!

Correct !

You must be pleased!\*Refer to the CCCF Resource Sheet #5, "98 Ways to Say Very Good," for a longer list of words of praise and encouragement you can use.

No one ever tires of being told that they are doing a good job.

Parents are sometimes ill-equipped to deal with children's many needs and with economic and social pressures in an increasingly chaotic world. As a result, some children are shortchanged and have difficulties coping with life's demands. Skilled child care professionals are one of Canada's most promising resources to help give our children productive and healthy tomorrows.

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