Discipline: An Eclectic Approach

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The search for a workable system of child guidance and discipline has resulted in a variety of "authorities" in the field of Child Care. Initiators of this search have been primarily parents who, perhaps because of a lack of self-confidence and trust, have sought out a specialist to assume the responsibility for successful child rearing. Historically there is ample evidence to suggest that parents, regardless of socioeconomic level, race or educational level, prefer reading parenting books about child rearing than any other method (Abram and Dowlin, 1979). This trend has resulted in an abundance of prescriptive literature, the "how to's" of discipline.

Over the many years of parenting book publication, the theories have ranged from authoritarian to laissez-faire types of guidance for young children. Perhaps one of the earliest examples of authoritarian guidance was that proposed by J.B. Watson who advocated treating the child objectively and on a rigid schedule. In his 1928 publication The Psychological Care of the Infant and Child, Watson concluded with "...won't you then remember when you are tempted to pat your child that mother love is a dangerous instrument? An instrument which may inflict a never healing wound..." Parents who adhered to this more authoritarian philosophy perpetuated such prevalent expressions as "Children should be seen and not heard" and "Spare the rod and spoil the child." For many parents it seemed to be unnatural advice, contrary to maternal and paternal "feelings" and inadequate in results; thus the Watson philosophy soon became less popular.

Moving into the era of the 30's and 40's total naturalness of the child was stressed and the theoretical position of "less strictness" emerged. Bronfenbrenner (1969) has observed that parents in the 1940's manifested greater permissiveness toward their children's spontaneous desires with concomitant freer expression of affection. It was also during this time that
The adult and child should work together in setting limits. One way is by channelling behavior into more positive outlets.

Freud and other psychoanalysts and psychologists made fundamental discoveries about hostile feelings. Parents were cautioned not to be excessively strict and disapproving, for the small child may become anxious and guilty about his hostile thoughts. By the 1960's, the outgrowth of the "permissiveness" period of child rearing was challenged by many parents who watched their children grow up uncertain about their own identity and societal values. Child care experts began to analyze and redefine their advice about discipline, to re-educate parents about what "permissive" means. It was time for discipline techniques to reflect a more middle position between rigid and permissive types, a process by which behavioral demands are scaled according to the abilities of the child. A new respect for discipline is that discipline varies with the situation, the child and the adult. Eclectic discipline in this discussion is aimed at young children under six. However, there is no reason to assume that parents could not apply these same techniques to older children when appropriate.

Eclectic Model

A popular belief relating to a definition of discipline is that discipline must be imposed on the child by an authority. However, when applied to adults, the term carries with it a more positive connotation, suggesting greater control and self-reliance. Looking at discipline more globally and not only in terms of age groups, we find that there are certain child related needs which are common at all developmental levels such as self-reliance, acceptance of self and others. Regardless of age the child needs to respect himself/herself and others before he/she can develop self discipline. We believe that adults can do this best by setting limits, by occasionally saying "No".

Children should not think that anything goes, just because adults want to be friendly and involved in children's activities, nor should children be silent and afraid of adults. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between these extremes, allowing children expression of their needs to feel strong and self-confident, and at the same time learning the elements of respect for adults and their peers. To this end, certain preconditions to the eclectic approach are presented as a basis for effective discipline. Adults need...

...a certain positive attitude toward children. This should include enjoyment of and respect for the child as an individual.

...to cultivate the ability to accept each adult/child situation as a new and original occurrence. Give children a break; they need a second chance. Transgressions need not be cumulative.

...information about developmental differences among children of different ages.

Environmental Control

Preschool children need space, an area that is theirs alone and time to use it effectively. The personal space needs of the child may be a small area in the classroom or home that is defin-