

Baby Discipline **Deborah Wood, Ph.D.**

ON THE WAY

A well-behaved child begins even before the baby is born. How are mother and father preparing themselves, their home and their support network for raising this new person?

Parenting is often described as the most challenging and the most rewarding of all occupations. Top on the list of challenges is the art of discipline – the magic by which the child's behavior follows the parent's guidance. In the pre-baby years, a parent-to-be takes note of families that don't have it, and admires those that do: "My children will never be that obnoxious. He can't control his children." "See how she only had to ask her children once? They're eager to please their mother." These observations are compared with how she imagines she will maintain discipline with her future child, and she draws herself closer to friends and relatives whose discipline styles mesh with her ideals. This mental image (the "parenting self") continues to be evaluated and revised throughout the parenting years. Those other parents, who seem to be adept at each particular stage of development, and other spare grown-ups who can give parents some essential time off, are pulled into the newborn's family circle.

HOME LANDSCAPE

An important aspect of raising a child is the family's space. Whether by experience (taking care of other infants), or education (infant care books and courses), a new parent can learn how to best prepare a home as a physical base of support. If baby supplies are stocked and conveniently placed, the baby's needs are more easily met. If hazards and temptations are eliminated (sharp-cornered coffee tables, glassware, electric cords, cleaning supplies, etc.), the parent will have fewer restrictions to place on the baby. On the other hand, if the home is not arranged to support meeting the baby's needs, both the parent and child will face unnecessary challenges. You can't control the rage of a hungry baby if it's too much trouble to get him his food. When the baby gets mobile – crawling, climbing, and toddling around his home, a well-prepared landscape becomes an ally in keeping his behavior in line. Easy-to-clean and durable are words to live by. He is also drawn to be close to his beloved grown-up. Compromise is the order of the day, in choosing which tools of Mom's and Dad's can be kept in spaces shared by the baby. A nonworking real telephone is an excellent way to share space when Dad needs to be on the functional phone. A well-behaved baby requires a safe environment, with interesting objects and a loving grown-up at hand.

ONE MIND, TWO BODIES

A beautiful dance is danced when parent and child share discipline. Both are active partners in avoiding pitfalls and sharing delights. Mom's

actions serve as an extension of baby Michael's distress signals – he cries for food, comfort, or entertainment, and she uses her body to perform the tasks required to satisfy. She reads him clearly and responds appropriately. Michael's pleasure signals are similarly absorbed by his mother and reflected in her facial expression and body movements – he giggles when she blows a raspberry on his belly, so she does it again and again. The parent helps to make the baby happy, and genuinely radiates with his joy. Sometime after age one, he discovers that his mind and hers are separate entities. The trick is to continue the proposition that both adult and child have the same goal – seeking contentment and avoidance of difficulties. The "terrible twos" are not so bad when the parent can see things through the toddler's mind, but act on them with an adult's wisdom. For example, two-year old Leon wants animal crackers before lunch. His mother agrees, yes, animal crackers are wonderful, and helps him to pick out two to put on the table to watch Leroy eat his minestrone. She playfully tells the crackers they'll have to go down to Leroy's tummy to get their own soup when he's finished with it.

GROWN-UP DISCIPLINE

Self-control is best acquired when the environment (especially the parent) is predictably ordered. Daddy wakes up nine-month-old Selena each morning with a silly song to get dressed by. She comes to anticipate each verse – the diaper, the shirt, the pants, and the moccasins. Most days, she cooperates in getting dressed. On the days she is resistant, Daddy patiently repeats the verse until her fussing and arching subside. She learns to anticipate that the song will prevail, and the clothes will be put on. The analogy in grown-up land is learning the futility of driving up to your bank's window after the posted closing time. You can fuss all you want, but that won't open the bank after hours.

Self-control is a basic tool for parents. In the first place, a parent serves as a model (Leroy's mother shouldn't eat any animal crackers herself until after the minestrone). In the second place, a baby has yet to acquire self-control – this develops over the next several years, with occasional lapses throughout the lifespan – and so depends on his parent to enforce behavior that is in his best interest. If Mom wavers in her decision about the animal crackers, and lets Leroy eat the whole box instead of any minestrone at all, she has not done what he cannot do for himself. He ends up irritable with a stomachache and they have a very unpleasant afternoon. A frequent disregard for helping Leroy to do the right thing puts him at risk for misbehavior. He will have limited self-control from a lack of guidance in the early years.

It's never too early for good discipline.