

An Educare Approach to Disciplining Children

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What is Discipline?

Often we think that discipline means punishment, such as sending children to their rooms or even resorting to shouting or spanking. On the other hand, it is also easy to equate discipline with bribing: “If you behave well while we are out I will buy you....”.

We need to reflect on how effective this kind of punishment really is in making a long-term impact to the child’s character development, when it is not really addressing the real issues underlying the misdemeanor.

Based on the principles of Educare, discipline means:

- *developing self-enabling habits;*
- *drawing out children’s own values;*
- *helping children to be self-responsible for their own actions and consequences;*
- *ordering themselves from the inside, not imposition from the outside.*

Let us further examine what is Discipline? For example, Anthony is in his first year of secondary school. Recently during an Art lesson he repeatedly called out and interrupted the teacher, Ms. White. Finally, in desperation, Ms. White (probably foolishly!) said, “Anthony, what IS the problem? Do you like my lesson or not?” Anthony, who believes in honesty but is not necessarily well-endowed with tact, replied, “I think it is boring”.

After the class, Anthony was called to the discipline master and told that he was expected to write a letter of apology to Ms. White. The letter was duly written. Anthony’s mother, herself a teacher educator, read it. It was clear to her that Anthony had merely gone through the motions of apologising, the letter was very perfunctory.

After talking further with him she found that he felt an injustice had been done to him, and that he was not really sorry anyway because he thought he had told the truth.

In this case, it was quite clear that the punishment was not going to have any beneficial effect on Anthony because he felt that what he had said was justified. Therefore, he merely went through the motions of writing the letter of apology without reflecting on his misdemeanor, and probably without any intention of changing his ways as a result of it.

Anthony’s mother spoke with him at length about the incident that had occurred in his Art class. They discussed the reasons why he had been interrupting in class (because he felt that he had something important to say), why he replied that the lesson was boring (because he wanted to speak the truth and had not really thought about the consequences that his blunt words could be hurtful), and why his letter was not a true reflection of his feelings when he really did not feel sorry about the situation.

After a great deal of discussion and negotiation, Anthony wrote another letter. In this one he apologised not for his actions but for not having thought enough about the consequences of what he said and the fact that he had hurt Ms. White's feelings.

He talked about the aspects of her classes that he appreciated, and explained frankly his reasons for having interrupted in the first place. He also outlined some alternative ways in which he could have behaved that would have enabled him to express his feelings truthfully but not hurtfully.

What Anthony's mother was able to achieve that the discipline master's punishment did not was to give Anthony the chance to think deeply about his own values and about what was right and wrong in relation to these values. In this way Anthony learned a valuable and enduring lesson about his own self-discipline.



The Educare view of discipline described in this section might contradict what a lot of parents believe discipline should mean. Pause here for a moment to reflect on whether any of these ideas are startling to you.

What influences children's behaviour?

According to psychological research, there are many things that can affect children's behaviour:

- *attention or revenge;*
- *sickness or emotional stress;*
- *worries or fear;*
- *basic needs not met;*
- *weather;*
- *changes in routine;*
- *boredom;*
- *over-excitement;*
- *growth and independence; and*
- *lost in their own world.*

With Educare one of the first things we need to do is to reflect on what influences the way children are behaving. Sometimes they are just totally absorbed in something else, and nothing will budge them. This can particularly be the case with children who are bright.

Understanding is a first step in deciding what to do about it! Are they so involved in something that they do not notice what you are asking? If this is the case, we can adjust accordingly to take preventative measures. For example, you can set the rule that there is no TV before school, or that the TV only goes on after they are dressed and ready. This again helps to children to develop their own routines – and if they do not the consequence is that there is no time for TV.

Some rules to be guided by

It is not always easy to think of suitable preventative measures or consequences that will support

children to reflect on their own values and develop life-long attitudes to self-discipline and self-responsibility.

It helps if we can have a framework to be guided by. Following is a series of questions that Baba suggests which epitomise Educare:

- *Does it touch the child's heart?*
- *Does it transform?*
- *Does it allow the child to learn?*
- *Does it keep the child's dignity intact?*
- *Is it a win-win situation for all parties involved?*

In the case of Anthony the discussion his mother had with him really did succeed in touching his heart and helping him to learn a lesson that would stay with him for life.

Anthony did not emerge as the “loser” in the situation, as he would have done had his mother allowed the original letter of apology to be sent, confused and indignant about why he had to be punished for speaking what he believed to be the truth. Anthony’s mother created a “win-win” situation in which Anthony, his teacher and the discipline master all emerged satisfied with the outcomes.

If we are adopting an Educare approach it is important that we create, and teach children to create, situations in which everybody wins. In the next article we will explore this aspect of “Educare” discipline in more detail.

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