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A parent's game plan

Discipline yourselves to learn how to be more effective

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - It's an age-old question and one many parents don't like to confront: How to discipline your child.

Sure, there's a history of techniques, such as threats and spankings, that require children to obediently comply through fear and intimidation.

There's the school of consequences, of punishment and rewards and "time-outs." Yet these methods lead to a reliance on external limits rather than self-discipline.

There's even the thought that piling on the praise will help a child's self-esteem enough so the child won't need to act out. Yet that can create "praise junkies."

Two child educators, Kim John Payne and Jack Petrash, believe there's a more natural, common-sense solution to the dilemma of discipline - one that engages the child at a developmentally appropriate level and builds a foundation to draw upon from toddlerhood through the teenage years.

Payne and Petrash will offer solutions to discipline problems at a two-day conference Friday and Saturday, March 11-12, at the Susquehanna Waldorf School in Marietta.

Through their presentations, "The Soul of Discipline" and "A Developmental Roadmap," the two will delve into the deeper issues behind discipline decisions and discuss age-appropriate behavior.

Both divide childhood into three developmental stages - the young child, the grade-school child and the teenager.

"At each stage something different is asked of us," said Petrash. "What I hope to do is point out places where it can be tricky to parents and give strategies for these moments."

By linking discipline styles to child development, Petrash and Payne say their strategies meet the child's needs without leading to conflict. Both espouse healthy reflection rather than a provoked reaction.

Payne says that by "maintaining an awareness of age-appropriate responses and conversations, and by using incentives, daily goals, boundaries, agreements and immediate feedback, it is possible to produce an effective formula for each age."

Payne, an internationally lauded author and psychologist, has helped children in

Third World countries survive traumatic events, helped violent juvenile offenders in halfway houses and even helped children conquer emotional and attention disorders.

"Whenever I am asked to give a presentation, I talk about how discipline is one of the best ways to help children feel safe when they're feeling stressed or vulnerable. It can create a real feeling of being held," he said.

He will discuss the history of changing parenting and discipline styles over the years, on March 11 from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.

"It is so revealing to explore discipline styles past and present, from the old 'blind obedience,' to behavior modifications based on punishment and reward, or even to our present-day behavior affirmation, often expressed as the 'good job' culture," he said.

He will explore the downfalls of each of these styles, then lead into his own, "embarrassingly simple, common-sense" methods.

Petrash, an educator for more than 30 years, will complement Payne's presentation with a Saturday, March 12, workshop from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Petrash says that "because so many of our parenting and teaching challenges occur naturally as part of child development, it is possible to anticipate these difficulties and to prepare for them in advance. For discipline to be effective it must always begin with preventive discipline," he said.

The Young Child

What we do matters.

"With a young child, they look to what we do. They learn through imitation," said Petrash. "This is why, so often, abused children grow up to be abusers. It's what's been modeled for them."

Payne's disciplining strategy at this point is what he terms "creative compliance." He says that in these early years, a parent's job is to train children to accept rules. Much of this is done through modeling the behavior parents want children to imitate. He says it is also important to give young children a chance to correct their worst mistakes with "do overs" rather than giving them harsh punishments.

"I caution strongly against behavior modification with young children. There's a danger of overusing time-outs," he said. "I also look at the problem of drowning children in affirmation."

Payne says what's effective is "the magic pause."

When making requests, Payne suggests to first pause and make sure "you're willing to do what it takes to have this done."

"What that means is standing inside every request you make. Avoiding on-the-fly requests. Not making requests you're not willing to lay on the railway tracks about."

Then, he says, it's important that the request is small and manageable.

He advocates cutting down the number of requests you make and, instead, promoting compliance wordlessly as you guide your child to the right decisions.

"At this stage in parenting, it's important to realize that actions speak louder than words," said Petrash, who adds that the common mistake parents of young children make is to talk to them too much.

Both say that it's important to establish a good foundation of discipline at this stage, before your child moves to the next.

Grade-School Child

What we feel matters.

"As children mature, they tune into a parent's inner life," said Petrash. "Often when we come home from work, we're preoccupied with the cares of the day, and it's hard to clear the deck and be open and in a buoyant emotional place - especially for dads, it's a big challenge to be present and attentive to children."

Payne says our cultural shift to one of higher stress has negatively impacted our children. "It's hard to be emotionally calm in our world," he said. "So many parents are rushing to the orthodontist, to a music lesson, then the kids have to do homework and they realize they don't have books they need or supplies they need so the parent has to go to the library or the store."

At this stage, parents should strive to remain calm and correct children when they make mistakes, rather than punish them.

"Now is the time to teach emotional and social skills," he said. "Children need to realize they are part of a team and that their actions impact on the family."

Payne says a key word in these years is "consultation."

He also says "this is the time to teach empathy by making children aware of the subtle put-downs inherent in certain tones of voice or body language. Parents should also consult with children in advance of challenging situations to help them learn to make good choices without adult supervision."

"With a 9- to 10-year-old child, their world is expanding ... often at this age they cross boundaries," said Petrash. "We don't have blind obedience from our children anymore at this stage. We have to realize they have become more independent and are obeying a different impulse."

For instance, a mother asks her daughter to clean her room. The daughter is engaged in a book. That child is not willfully disobeying a request to clean her room, says Petrash, but instead may be too engaged in reading a book to respond.

"If we get upset, emotionally we present painful anger and hostility to our children, then we'll feel guilty afterward," he added. "What's needed is for a parent to calmly say that since the child didn't comply, that there will be consequences."

Petrash says consequences should be measured and issued calmly, so that the child realizes she is expected to empathize with the needs of the family and not just follow her own desires.

Teenage Child

What we think matters.

"In teen years, kids don't care what we do or what we feel - but they care what we think," said Petrash. "That's why they argue with us, because they want to know what we think."

"A parent's job description in the teen years is to engage children in a thoughtful way." Yet engaging a teen in conversation can be frustrating.

"When they come home from school and you ask how their day was, they'll say 'Fine.' And when you ask what they did, they'll say 'Nothing,' so you always have to be on watch for places where the child opens up, and often that's late at night," Petrash said.

Realize, too, that it's a teenager's job to argue - it's how he or she learns to think and form opinions, he said.

"It's not a character flaw, it's how they learn critical thinking. They're developing abstract reasoning," he said.

Humor can break the tension.

"You want to find some way not to get so bound up in it that you push them away," he added.

If things remain heated, "hit the pause button" and refuse to respond in the heat of the argument.

Payne advocates using a teen's intellectual awareness to collaborate instead of negotiate. His motto: "Delay gratification. Anticipate hot spots. Affirm good choices."

The Aftermath

Parenting is a series of steps moving toward one goal, but along the way we make mistakes we're ashamed of, said Payne. "But it's OK. We need to forgive ourselves."

Petrash offers a baseball analogy as hope for struggling parents.

"You can get it right one out of three times and still make it to the Hall of Fame. Baseball has such a long season and a good player realizes he's not going to win them all, but what counts is that after a bad day, you bounce back," he said. "In parenting, you're going to make mistakes, but what counts is what you do after the bad day."

At the Susquehanna Waldorf School, 15 W. Walnut St., Marietta.

An opportunity to discuss and reflect on questions and experiences will follow the presentations.

Call Lydia Sadauskas 426-4506, extension 223, by Monday, March 7, for fee information and registration.

Although it will appeal to parents, the conference also is designed to meet the needs of teachers, coaches, health-care workers and counselors.

For more information, visit online at www.susquehannawaldorf.org.

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