

The Heart of Discipline

By *Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D.*

An enraged mom pulls her son into my office. At her wits end with her 10-year-old's acting out behavior at school, she demanded to come into his private counseling session without notice. Across town his dad had a different reaction—on his son's weekend visit, while staying very calm, he put his misbehaving boy over his knee and whacked him.*

Though parenting books and classes abound, parents are still at a loss for how to discipline their children. They tell me they have no patience to set up a clear behavioral program; for them it takes too much time and is ineffective. Sometimes they're looking for a quick fix, other times the idea of a regulated system is too foreign to them. But parents are also missing something critical. They are forgetting their heart. They are forgetting that love is not just a noun, but also a verb. That means acting lovingly, with kindness and awareness.

My 25 years of working with families, plus my own personal meditation practice, have shown me the value of connecting to and coming from the heart, of stepping back, of time-outs for grown-ups as well as for children. Too often when parents "discipline" their child, it is done in a moment when their own "buttons" have been pushed. Whether it's at home after a long and stressful day or in public when they're horrified that their child's misbehavior reflects on them, parents often react from their inner kid's frustrated position. They forget that their behavior is the best role model for teaching good behavior.

I find myself helping parent and child heal the wounds that they have inflicted on each other. Not so much with their minds, but with their hearts. Bottom line—parents must calm themselves. Kids tell me screaming is a close second to hitting in what they fear most from parents. So I start by inviting parents to visualize the kind of family atmosphere they truly want, focusing on their heart's desire and the heart of their child. If they set their intention of having a loving, calm home, then they can take the steps to get there.

I teach families simple breathing techniques (a basic meditation style I call "the balloon breath") to help center themselves and be able to *respond*, rather than *react* to a situation. The balloon breath is simply focusing your awareness and breathing two to three inches below your navel. Because it takes just minutes, balloon breathing is easily incorporated into a busy day.

To create an atmosphere of loving calmness, I suggest parents imagine a favorite place. It may be a coveted vacation location, a childhood memory, or a place they create on the spot. While they are in this special place, I propose putting themselves in their child's position by remembering what it was like to be a young boy or girl, and what they would

have preferred their parents doing. Adults learn to be aware of how their behavior is affecting their children. They can then re-evaluate and develop a new set of personal parenting goals.

Another simple exercise that has helped many families connect to each other is "sending love on a beam of light." Pose the question, "If you would like to send love to your child (parent) what color would it be? Then while doing the balloon breath, have them imagine sending love from their heart to their child on a beam of light. They can practice in my office and later at home and see who "feels" the love first. The idea is to make it fun like a game rather than a chore.

With a new intention and viewpoint, parents can create a heart-centered, loving behavioral program that meets everyone's needs. Although that entails many traditional steps, from setting limits to focusing on the positive, the difference here is staying mindful and connected to their heart, with kindness and gentleness.

As for the mom who dragged her son into my office? By her own admission, after our exercises, she left a changed woman. She told her son, "I'm feeling totally different. I feel my anger is gone and only love remains. We can work this out."

That's the heart of discipline.

- To protect privacy, a composite is used.

About the Author

Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D. is a child educational psychologist, an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at UCLA, and author of the Los Angeles Times bestselling book, "The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success" (Perigee/Penguin). In addition to her private practice, she creates therapeutic relaxation CDs for children, teens, and parents, and teaches workshops internationally on the healing power of children's imaginations. You can find out more about her at www.ImageryForKids.com.