

LEARNING HOW TO BE FIRM AND CONSISTENT



Key Principles

- Using parental maturity
- Taking action
- Being positive and consistent
- Building the relationship

MEET... Stephanie, Henry, four-year-old Catalina and two-year-old Adrienne for the third time. Stephanie is making progress in setting limits and following through with consequences. She is struggling, though, to feeling comfortable letting her two daughters experience any unhappiness or discomfort that might result from an undesirable consequence.



Using parental maturity

Imagine yourself in a foreign country where you don't speak the language well and you're unfamiliar with the area's laws and customs. Most of us would feel grateful to have a local resident as a friend or guide. We would quite easily respect and appreciate her help and advice, most likely deferring to her natural authority. Children need guides too. If we accept ourselves as more experienced and mature than our children, and convey that goodwill and respect, they will usually accept our natural authority. Some parents are unclear about how to use their maturity to guide their children. Some are uncomfortable influencing their children too strongly, letting their children exercise inappropriate freedom or control beyond their ability to handle it. In these situations, a child has freedom without order. Other parents use their greater experience to overly control their child, robbing him or her of experiences that foster responsible behavior. Children in these situations have order, but no freedom. Exercising your natural authority appropriately means finding the position where you provide your child with a healthy balance between order and freedom.

Taking action

Taking action and talking less is a principle that runs through many episodes in this series. In past episodes we've looked at how some parents fall into two traps: 1) asking children over and over to do the same thing without taking any action when the child doesn't cooperate; 2) allowing themselves to be drawn into arguments that distract from the original request or issue. In addition to these common traps, parents can undermine their natural authority by trying to appease or distract a child after following through with a consequence.

These behaviors reflect a parent's discomfort with the idea that it is okay to follow through with a fair consequence that is enforced firmly and kindly.

Being positive and consistent

Children thrive on encouragement, and being consistent ensures that there will be many opportunities for encouragement. As we discussed in *Episode 6*, when rules and expectations are inconsistent, it is tempting to violate them. When a parent is inconsistent, he or she is setting up an environment in which the child will be tempted to break the rules and, as a result, have limited opportunities to succeed. By being consistent, you teach your child what is acceptable and constructive behavior, and what is not. The more frequently your child acts responsibly and constructively, the more opportunities you will have to be positive and encouraging.

Building the relationship

In earlier episodes we saw how moms Kathy and Tara built their relationships with their children by incorporating fun into their activities. Another aspect of developing a positive relationship with your child involves building mutual respect. Certainly at a very young age, children's needs come first. As they mature, though, they need to come to understand that others also have needs. Understanding this at home is a natural starting point and the beginning of giving them social skills they will need as they become more independent.



A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Using parental maturity

Time-out for Adrienne

Stephanie has made great progress in accepting her natural authority by establishing limits and following through with consequences. When she tells Adrienne to leave the kitchen because she misused the computer, and then takes her to her room for a time-out when Adrienne hits her, she is much more decisive than in an earlier episode when Catalina hit her. Later, when Adrienne is unreasonable about her snack of milk and cereal, Stephanie ends the power struggle and sibling rivalry by quickly putting away the snack and taking Adrienne out of the kitchen. Stephanie has worked hard to establish limits and follow through with appropriate consequences and has made great strides in that area. However, she is undermining herself when she tries to soften the effect of the consequences. This is a clue that she is not fully comfortable exercising her natural authority. By listening to her choice of words and watching her behavior, we can see that Stephanie wants the girls to feel okay about what has happened. For example, she asks Adrienne if it's "okay" when she puts her in her room. Stephanie also tries to distract Adrienne from her disappointment about having her cereal taken away. Contrast Stephanie's discomfort with her parental role with Henry's comfort at being firm, yet kind, with Adrienne when Adrienne acts bossy with him about having cereal. As parents have



more experience setting firm limits and following through kindly, they will see that their children are no-worse-for-wear. In fact, they will find their children being more respectful and cooperative. As you establish and follow through with reasonable limits, pay attention to any mixed messages you might be sending.



Taking action *Computers, Computer Disks, and Snack*

During the afternoon, there are a number of times when the girls behave unreasonably or do not follow established rules. Each time, Stephanie acts quickly to put a consequence into effect without talking (giving warnings and reminders). Stephanie has made great progress. She is not talking too much before taking action, but in some cases, she is probably talking too much afterwards. Her efforts to comfort and distract Adrienne from the consequences of her own behavior tell Adrienne that she can still get some extra mileage by breaking rules. Sure, she has to put up with an undesirable consequence, but she's still getting a lot of great extra attention from Mom!

Being positive and consistent

Stephanie is still working to establish her credibility, and we can see a lot of progress between this episode and *Episode 5*, when we first met her family. As she makes more progress in setting limits and establishing her credibility, she will have more opportunities for positive contact with her daughters. In this episode, Catalina accepts the consequence of having the computer disks removed when she didn't put them away and seems to be having a generally friendly afternoon with her mother.



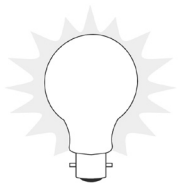
Building the relationship

In her discussion with Dr. Morse, Stephanie sees that the girls are very demanding of her time and seem less able to be independent when she is home than when the girls are home just with Henry. She would like to have some time for her own activities during the day and thinks both girls are old enough now for her to be able to do that. Stephanie can start by telling the girls what she would like and asking for their help. If she is kind and firm, with a reasonable consequence if they don't cooperate, she should be able to arrange some time for herself. She can start with a short amount of time and build up to longer periods. Having a good relationship with your children is not all about giving. As children get older, they can begin to appreciate that others have needs too. By introducing this idea at home, you can build a positive, mutually respectful relationship with your child, as well as help prepare him or her for experiences outside the family.



Action Guidelines from This Episode

- The consequence of misbehavior is to not to be with people.
- Everything doesn't need to be okay for children.
- Don't teach children that you are always available.
- Convey firmness clearly.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. Do you talk and explain before putting a consequence into effect? If you do, pick one area that is problematic and firmly and kindly enforce the consequence you have established the first time your child challenges the limit. Track how your child's behavior changes during the week.
2. When you do follow through with a consequence, do you sometimes feel guilty or sorry for your child? If you do, do you try to soften the consequence? For the next week, try to be matter-of-fact when carrying out consequences. Watch to see if your child tests and pushes the limits less frequently as you become more confident.