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The Balancing Act of Parenthood

Being a good parent requires balancing several things simultaneously. On one hand children need firm, consistent discipline. On the other hand, they need to know that they are loved unconditionally.

Research done several years ago indicated the importance of this balance. On one study, microphones were placed throughout households such that family interactions were recorded. These interactions were then classified as either being positive or negative. There were sharp differences between the interactional patterns of families in which the children were considered “normal and healthy” versus families in which at least one child was a “juvenile delinquent.”

The researchers found that the ratio of positive to negative interactions in the families of juvenile delinquents was 1:1; whereas the interactions of the families of the “normal and healthy” children the ratio was 8:1. Thus, if we tell ourselves, “For every negative thing I say to my child, I will say one positive thing,” then we are falling way short of the mark! For every negative or critical interaction, we need to have *at least eight* interactions that are positive. Given these findings, many parents need to re-balance their interactions with their children, *increasing* the amount of praise and overall positive statements.

On the other hand, some parents are too lenient in disciplining their children. This is especially true when the parent feels the child has “been through enough already” and is thus hesitant to be firm in discipline. In many situations, a parent becomes a “friend” to their child instead of being a parent.

A single mother, for example, may try to be friends with her teenage daughter, such that they share clothes, talk about each other’s dates, and interact more like equals than as mother and daughter. The difficulty with this is that the teenage daughter very much needs guidance and discipline, and it is hard for her to accept this from a “friend.” Another example is a single father who has visitation every other weekend and makes the whole weekend “fun time.” Having fun without discipline does not equal fatherhood.

Using the rationalization of “my child’s been through enough” as an excuse to not discipline the child is a mistake and teaches the child to use helplessness as a way to manipulate others to get what they want. *Because* the child has been through a lot, he or she needs *more* structure, routine and consistency than other children. Discipline should be structured, routine and consistent, but also calm and unemotional.

In conclusion, to be an effective parent, there must be a balance between discipline and love, work and play, praise and instruction, and consistency and flexibility. Succeeding at this “balancing act” is one of the most difficult challenges of parenthood.