

Parental Influence

It is the nature of children to be disobedient, to do things they should not do, or refuse to obey their parents' requests or demands. This is what children are supposed to do. It is how they learn and stretch themselves. Parents have the task of influencing and controlling the behaviour of younger children and teaching their children to follow basic rules. This involves discipline, encouragement, and teaching. Parental influence on children's behaviour relies on several things: The consistency of rules; the expectations of the parent; and the role of both encouragement and punishment.

The consistency of simple rules is central to effective family life and parenting. This means that it is made clear to a child what the general rules or guidelines are, and what the consequences are for both obeying and disobeying them. It is up to the parent to encourage children when necessary and to enforce consequences consistently.

Some parents are very clear and consistent while others are inconsistent and vague. Studies of families show that parents who are clear and consistent have children who are much less likely to be defiant or non-compliant. Consistency of rules does not produce little robots rather it promotes a self confidence in the child. While rules must not ever be overbearing, dogmatic, or overly rigid general rules and guidelines that are strictly kept are very good for children. Children from families with consistent rules and expectations are more competent, sure of themselves, and unlikely to have significant behaviour problems.

Interestingly, a large study of second-year students measured the level of control in a family by asking young teenagers to rate the degree to which someone in their family makes sure their homework is done, knows where they are and what they are doing, and generally keeps an eye on them. The findings showed that teenagers who had parents who did these simple things had much higher psychological competence (self esteem and self confidence) than those who did not. Greater family control was clearly associated with greater psychological competence in the teenager. This is a simple but compelling finding that all young parents could do well to appreciate.

The level of expectation parents have of their children's behaviour is also an important predictor. Is the child expected to show relatively mature behaviour or do the parents think its important not to expect too much too soon? Studies of such differences show that higher expectations seem to be associated with better outcomes. Children whose parents make high demands on them - expecting to help around the house or to show relatively mature behaviour for their age - have higher self-esteem, show more generosity and altruism toward others, and have lower levels of aggression. Obviously, high expectations can be carried too far but when parents expect a child to be as independent and helpful as possible for their age, they seem to foster a sense of competence in the child that carries over into other situations.

To understand the process of how you influence and positively control your children you must understand the concept of consequences. Having positive consequences for good behaviour is a natural and inevitable way that parents encourage their children. Having negative consequences or punishment for bad behaviour is the other form of domestic discipline. It is usually aimed at getting a child to stop doing something prohibited. It may also be used to try to encourage a child to do something he or she is resisting. Punishment usually involves some negative consequences such as withholding privileges, assigning extra household chores, sending a child to his/her room, etc.

The most effective negative consequences are those that produce effective changes without distressing the child unduly.

The best kind of negative consequence is also one that is used immediately and has a low level of intensity and severity. For example, during the TV off until a child is finished their chores, not allowing a child out until they have finished their homework, or addressing a child's violent play immediately after it occurs. Similarly, the best kind of encouragement is immediately after a child makes an effort to do something. Immediate consequences are more effective than delayed ones. Small children in particular find it hard to appreciate the logic of a delayed punishment because they cannot fully remember the earlier event.