



being firm

AND KIND AT THE SAME TIME

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

One week into our family's trip to California for a work-related training program, and I was pulling my hair out. My two youngest children were pushing all my buttons and finding some new ones. Bedtime had become a nightly struggle. And I began to dread the weekend dedicated to family vacation time.

As I tiredly flipped through my Positive Discipline cards, I sighed and remembered that my children were trying to communicate. Misbehavior is always a form of communication. A misbehaving child is a discouraged child.

I took a deep breath. I thought about my children being discouraged, and was able to see their behavior through a lens of compassion rather than frustration. For whatever reasons, they weren't feeling a sense of belonging or significance. It made sense. We were all trying to adjust to the time change, a new sitter, and my increased workload. I had been reacting to their misbehavior by trying sternly to set more limits.

Positive Discipline, however, is about moving from being punitive or reward-based to being kind and firm at the same time. It's a respectful approach that acknowledges that when we feel worse, we do worse, and when we feel better, we do better.

Yet often, as parents, we get caught in a cycle. We punish or cajole. Our children rebel, or maybe get back at us, or perhaps retreat. Things get worse. We punish again, as if making life more miserable will help our children make better choices. In reality, though, we are all more likely to do better if someone supports us to figure out what went wrong and how to make things right.

As a case in point, I arrived quite late the first two days of my training program. I knew I had made a mistake and already felt bad about it. Later in the day the director kindly and quietly reminded me about arrival time expectations. Her communication was warm and understanding. That night I rearranged child care, left considerably earlier, and felt successful about the changes. I

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wanted to improve and felt supported in doing so. If the director had reprimanded me, perhaps even publicly, I certainly would have slunk into discouragement.

Our children deserve and need the same kind of respect. They do best when they are encouraged rather than punished or pampered.

With this in mind, my husband and I took time to hear our seven-year-old's ideas about how to support her when she was frustrated. We stayed open to ways to give our children a sense of purpose and meaning. At dinner one night, we really listened and watched as our three-year-old showed us again and again and again how he could fold his napkin. He was focused and feeling masterful, which was more important in that moment than whether he had eaten his avocado.

With the shift in routines, we made sure our children understood what was expected and then, with kindness and firmness, held true to those expectations. Which is what the director of training did for me. She didn't make exceptions or excuses, or make me feel worse or demotivated. She merely held loving limits and expressed a belief that she knew I could get there on time. And I did.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker is a Certified Positive Discipline Educator, Director of Education at The Montessori School of the Berkshires, and is always on that seemingly unattainable quest to become a better parent. www.berkshiremontessori.org



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