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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: HOW TO APPLY THE RATIONAL DISCIPLINE APPROACH IN YOUR HOME

Keep Your Goal in Mind at All Times: The Development of Psychologically Healthy Children Who Demonstrate Healthy, Robust Values and Character

Over the course of many years and decades of parent counseling, I have urged parents to have a clear sense of direction, a parenting roadmap, so they would always be able to organize their parental attitudes, approaches and interventions around the goals they were trying to develop. The clear direction I urge my patients to aim for is the development of psychologically healthy children who have robust, healthy values and character in personal relationships and work relationships.

Children raised with the appropriate discipline structure will naturally develop healthy character. However, it is useful to articulate the development of character and to explicitly create interventions and approaches based on a rational discipline structure to further the development of character.

But what is this thing called “character?”

Character is not adherence to a set of religious or moral precepts. It is the constellation of enduring virtues which allow for successful living.

Character may be conceptualized as having two major components: work character and relationship character.

Each act taken by a child contributes to the development of a positive habit. Each positive habit, when done repeatedly and supported by the parents, becomes “a part of the child,” and a part of the child’s approach to life, to working and to relating. During this process, a parent should say, over and over, *“I really like who you are becoming. You are really learning how to be patient... or forgiving.... or how to work hard...”*

Once these habits occur when no one else is around, when they happen without external reward given imminently and when they happen even when it is not convenient to exhibit these habits, virtue is developed. We then think of our child as an inherently “good” person. They think of themselves as being a “good” person who is usually kind, tolerant, understanding, forgiving, able to see another person’s perspective. And they think of themselves as a hard worker who knows how to stay with a task, develop perseverance, believe in their ability to learn, and know how to work as part of a team with others. These ideas about themselves become part of their “self-image,” and “reliable personality.” And this leads to solid, reality-based self-confidence and self-esteem.

Additionally, virtues and character are self-sustaining, leading to internal feelings of self-respect and often, even usually, also lead to reward from others the child is in a relationship with or works with.

Once that process takes hold and is sustained, we have the development of enduring character. This enduring, self-sustaining and self-rewarding character is the parent’s greatest gift to their child as they head off to college, to an independent work life, or into an intimate love relationship.

Apply Principles Proven to Help Parents Develop Psychologically Healthy Children

When pursuing your goal of raising psychologically healthy children, it will help you immeasurably if you organize all of your actions, interventions, and approaches around three basic, integrated principles:

1. Communicating Acceptance;
2. Setting Standards, Rules and Limits in Accordance With Your Values; and,
3. Helping Your Child Become a Self-Directing Choice-Maker Who Learns From His or Her Mistakes.

Always Communicate an Attitude of Acceptance to Your Child:

Acceptance for who and what they are. This is surely not easy to do. Sometimes our child manifest parts of our personality which we do not like or

accept. Sometimes they manifest parts of our spouse's personality which we do not like or accept. Sometimes they have temperamental characteristics which drive us crazy. Sometimes they are neurobiologically compromised and we just cannot relate to the way they think, act and function. Sometimes they are simply going through a developmental phase which confuses or angers us. All of these factors make it very difficult to accept our children.

A common example which parents report to me is when their child screams at the top of their lungs *"I hate you!!! SO MUCH!!!"* Parents often get emotionally destroyed by these words. They cannot believe that the child they gave so much love to could feel that way. They cannot believe that their sweet, loveable child could speak that way to them. I totally understand. Yet kids don't just love their parents. They also have moments where they are intensely angry with their parents. They are not lukewarm. Parents receiving these angry, hurtful outbursts feel hurt, angry, offended, shocked, and even guilty (*"I must be doing something wrong."*) Yet this is just another moment where acceptance is needed. But what does acceptance mean in this situation?

First, it means to accept your own feelings of being offended, hurt, angry, and shocked. You are human. Acceptance does not mean you go into a trance and feel nothing. It does not mean that you blow the child off and minimize their feeling (*"You're just hangry. Let me make you some lunch."*) It means you take your own feeling seriously, without self-reproach, you settle yourself emotionally, and then you take the child's feeling seriously as well. "I see you are really furious with me. I would like to understand what I did or said that hurt or upset you so much.

I typically remind parents of two things after situations like this.

First, that children and all human beings cannot help but hate occasionally the very persons they love the most. I share that I have never, ever hated my mailman. I cannot even remember his first name. But I could not say that about my family members. I love them too much. They have the power to hurt and disappoint me too much.

Second, I remind parents that many children would never dare speak that way to their parent, not because they never felt angry or hateful towards their

parent, but because they were too darn scared to open their mouth with serious anger. Perhaps it is a sign of their child's trust in their tolerance and acceptance that they dare to be fully honest about their feelings. This is a strange way to look at it, but it is often true.

However, as wonderful as all of the above sounds, I **guarantee** that you will fail to accept your child fully, perhaps on a daily basis. We all do. Nonetheless, if acceptance of your child is your aim, you will immediately know what you have to do to get back on track with your child when you fail. You will need to go inward and address your own distress and anger. You will then need to own up to your child for your part of the relationship fracture. You will then be positioned to apply the communication skills I wrote about earlier in this e-book, in the service of showing acceptance and restoring your relationship with your child.

Set and Enforce Standards, Rules, and Limits For Your Child, and then Enforce these Standards, Rules and Limits Consistently:

Parents seem to have no problem giving orders. They often start out calmly enough, but then escalate their tone of irritation when the child ignores their orders. I recommend against giving so many orders. If it is simply part of daily life, like clearing the table, I recommend that you simply clear the table with the child from a very young age. Make it a team effort. By engaging in responsibilities with your child you change the calculus for the child. Instead of feeling "bossed around," your child will be motivated by your example, and may even enjoy feeling helpful to you in your efforts. This places chores and responsibilities into the arena of helping each other in a very personal way. The "chore" then becomes an opportunity to learn about family life and teamwork and helping each other. You replace orders and nagging to "go do your chores" with communicating your standard and values this way: *"I need to get the kitchen cleaned up after dinner, but I am usually wiped out after working all day and cooking. Would you help me? We'll do it together. I would so appreciate the help. I want to be part of a family that pitches in and helps each other whenever we can. Will you join in with me?"*

However, there are occasions when a parent simply must set a standard, rule or limit. It is non-negotiable. It is something the child must do.

One example would be the rule that a child must be ready for school at a certain hour. Another example would be a child getting off their iPhone during dinner. In those instances, replace hastily shouted orders and irritated complaints and exasperated reminders with rules and limits which demonstrate your values and standards. Let's look at what a parent might do in each example.

You set a rule that your junior high son must be ready for school by 8 am, when you drive them and their younger sister to school at the same time. He is not ready to leave at 8 am. You are correctly not willing to make his sister late for school because of his choice. So you drive his sister to school. You leave your son home with your spouse who is working remotely. You go back for your son at home afterwards. It is too far for him to walk. You are not willing to let him miss the day at school. Here is an example of what you might say in support of your values and standards. *"Jack, I am not happy with your being late for the drive to school. I think it is inconsiderate to your teacher. I was not willing to make your sister late. I am also not willing to let you miss school. From this day on whenever you are late and I must come back to get you, I will be charging you an "Uber fee." I will take it out of your allowance. This will be entirely your choice. We'll see how this goes for a few weeks and then discuss this more."*

On the second example, you explain to everyone in your family, including all children and your spouse, that you want a family dinner during which people share. You explain why this is important to you. It reflects your values and your commitment to a family life which is personal, intimate and in which family members make time for one another. Your daughter shows up the next day with her iPhone which she constantly checks during dinner, intermittently giggling and texting her friends back.

Here is an example of what you might say in support of your values and limits. *"Julie, I asked you to leave your iPhone on the kitchen counter to be charged up during dinner. I have explained why I want that. Here is your choice. You can leave your phone on the kitchen counter, or bring it to the table. If you bring it to the table, I will excuse you from dinner. After dinner I will come to your room. I will ask you for your phone for the rest of the evening. If you refuse to give it me, I will set limits on it so it automatically shuts off during certain times of the evening. The choices will be yours."*

Siblings putting each other down or insulting each other is damaging to both the victim and the perpetrator. One child loses self-esteem, the other learns to be a bully. The rule would be: if anyone insults another family member at the dinner table, they will immediately be sent to their room. This rule must be enforced each and every time. It applies to every member of the family, including the parents. (I have written earlier in this e-book about what to do if a child refuses to go to time out.) Another example would be a child who is “hooked” on a computer game or absorbed with screen time. You make a judgment that this addiction or dependency is not helping your child develop the quality of family relationships they need, or that it is interfering with the work capacities you want them to develop in their schoolwork. Your values tell you to do something. But what? You should set a limit on computer games or screen time and then enforce those limits consistently.

I am spelling out these conversations in detail to help parents understand a way of thinking and speaking. I do not expect parents to speak at such great lengths with children, nor do I expect parents to apply what I suggested literally, without adaptation to their individual child. However, **the idea of identifying the rules and limits which reflect your values and the idea of delivering consequences to the child who violates the rules and limits is a core foundation of the principle of setting and enforcing standards, rules and limits.**

Many parents tell me they don’t enforce the limits they set because they get cowed by their child’s anger. The parent’s own difficulty with tolerating someone being angry or even furious with them arises. (*“I can’t bear it when she screams at me; I get frightened when he throws things; I get furious when she hounds me relentlessly.”*) What should one do then? Hold firm. But first, deal with your own internal distress. Enforcing your limits consistently requires the parent to go inward, face their own issue of being afraid of intense anger, and then resolve to act. (I have written earlier in the e-book about what to do if your child refuses to tolerate your limit. In short, you must be smarter than your child. For example, if your child sneaks back on their screen or computer, remove the device for a set period of time, even if it means bringing the device to work or placing it in the trunk of your car. If necessary, find a technology expert who will set up parental time and content limits on your child’s phone. Whatever it takes to remain in charge. Of course, you should let your child speak and express their perspectives on what they need and what is important to them. But in the end, you are the

parent and you have more wisdom and life experience than they have. You have more executive function capacity, more adult brain power, regardless of I.Q., than they have. It is your responsibility to make judgements about what is good for them and what will promote their growth best.

Encourage Your Child to Become a Self-Directing Choice Maker Who Learns From His or Her Mistakes:

Helping your child become a good choice-maker requires guiding them through four steps:

1. Step One: **Help them learn that all choices** have consequences. Encourage your child to think of all situations as requiring a choice, and help them experience and learn that all choices have consequences.
2. Step Two: **Help them understand the connection** between their choice and its consequences.
3. Step Three: **Help them review the choice** they made, the factors which drove the choice, and the consequences of that choice.
4. Step Four: **Guide them** through the final and most important step: **learning from their choice**, especially learning from their mistakes.

Let's drill down to understand more precisely what I mean by encouraging your child to be a self-directing, responsible choice-maker who learns from their mistakes. When I encourage parents to commit to helping their children become responsible choice-makers, I emphasize the word "responsible." By that I mean **your child is ALWAYS responsible for the consequence of their choice.**

Here is a very small example of what I mean. If a child is deciding what clothes to wear to school and you think their choice is unwise, you may give them your opinion. But then you step back and let them choose. If they get teased by friends, your job is to help them process their feelings. You then help them figure out what they would choose to do differently next time.

The same holds true in your child's choices within the family. If your child rejects their siblings offer to play a game and then the sibling refuses to help them later with a project, you don't rush in to force them to play together or to help one another. You sit down with the child who made the choice which initiated this negative exchange and help them figure out what led them to

make their decision and whether or not the decision they made, with its predictable consequences, was one they would make again. Your job is to help them learn, not to spare them unpleasant experiences.

You may ask, *“Don’t I have to force them to keep my punishments?”* Yes and no. Here is an example of how I might handle enforcement of punishments. Let’s say your child used their iPhone for an hour after the time for shutting down all devices occurred. You find out about it the next morning. The consequence you deliver is this: you tell your child that they must surrender their iPhone to you. You indicate that their iPhone will be returned to them later that day, after dinner and homework are completed. They refuse to give up their iPhone. Rather than become insistent, angry, argumentative, you give them a clear choice. *“Robert, here is your choice. You can hand me your phone now, or you can hold onto your phone. If you hand me your phone now, I will return it as promised, after dinner and homework. If you do not hand me your phone now, I will place you on my timer. The longer you take to hand me your phone, the greater the consequence in terms of how long you will have to wait until I return the phone to you. If you make the decision to NEVER give me your phone, I will either cancel your phone subscription until we sort this out, or I will place parental limits on your phone which will reduce your phone time indefinitely. This is your choice. I hope you choose wisely.”*

When parents are confronted with a child who is about to make a poor choice, they often become angry or anxious and resort to saying things which would cause the child to feel afraid, guilty or ashamed. This then leads to kids who become fearful, or angry and resentful towards their parents. There is a better way. Parents should give your child a choice about what to do. But always couple this choice with consequences, delivered either by you or by others outside the family. Then help them learn and improve from any mistakes in judgment they make. The upset will be about the unpleasant consequences, rather than upset about their belief that you are trying to “nag” them or “run their life.”

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