

Being consistently consistent

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

Passover and parenting: The two go together like milk and cookies. Except for last week when you were desperately trying to prepare for Passover with your little ones home from school and underfoot, and the big ones asleep, instead of helping you get ready. So much to do and too much stress.

It's easy to lose sight of what's important and the children feel our tension in the lead-up to the holiday. They are out of routine and you're out of patience – not a good combination. With the Seder experience behind you, hopefully having left your children with fond memories, perhaps now everyone is feeling more relaxed and enjoying some family time. That said, family time can be a recipe for drama and disaster.

While it is wonderful to wake up a bit later, not rush to make school lunch and snacks, or push everyone out the door, the break from the fine-tuned routine of carpooling, after-school activities and bedtime often presents its own challenges. Kids (and adults too) may prefer screen time alone to outdoor time with the family. No one seems to want to do the same thing and car trips become one big argument. It may actually feel that right about now everything is one enormous struggle. For better or worse, with a little time and patience, next week the children will return to school and you'll be able to breathe again – or will you?

Some of my favorite clients are parents who come in with developmental/behavioral concerns about their children. Whether it's temper tantrums, sleep issues, eating difficulties or acting out at home and/or school, the best solution I can offer is to always be consistent.

So easy to envision in theory, yet so hard for most parents to execute. After all, when your child is having a temper tantrum in the middle of the grocery store, or looks at you with those pleading puppy-dog eyes, or when you are dropping from lack of sleep, isn't it so much easier to just give in – even if it is just once, this time only? We have all been there. Instead of letting our child cry for half an hour and then walking in and picking them up, making it harder the next night, or disagreeing with our spouse in front of the kids, being consistent from one day to the next, or as members of the same parenting team, has long-lasting benefits. Here are some suggestions to help make it happen.

1. Think of discipline as teaching your child what is correct rather than attempting to punish bad behavior. In this way you can always point out what is wrong and why, as well as the desired alternative behavior. “We don't hit, hitting hurts. We talk about our feelings.”

2. When at all possible, always attempt to reward good behavior and ignore bad behavior. The more attention we pay to any behavior the more we will see that behavior increase. Therefore, the more “good” behavior we catch, the more good behavior we will see. Your goal is to “catch” your child being good and reward that. If you pay attention to a child when he is misbehaving, it will be in his best interest to misbehave again in order to get your attention.

through. If you make empty threats, your child will not take you seriously. A “no” is a “no”!

4. Ensure that the “punishment” fits the “crime.” If for example, your child is a half hour late coming home, rather than grounding her for a month (which punishes you both), you may want to tell her that for the next week her curfew is one hour earlier, or that she is grounded for a few days. You can revise your punishment after a few days (based on good behavior), enabling your child to work to reduce her “fine.” This lets her know that you recognize her efforts. Again, the goal is to be consistent, discuss what has happened, reward changes and be flexible. This process takes place through discussion with your child so that she realizes that you're following through and it is not that you have forgotten that you disciplined her.

5. Take a moment before you punish. Stop, think and allow yourself time to calm down. It is perfectly okay and at times even more effective to tell your child that you are very upset by his behavior and need time to think about what the consequences of his actions will be. It is then crucial to follow through at a later time with your action plan. The closer the consequences are to the infraction, the more relevant and meaningful and therefore effective your discipline will be.

6. Never do for children what they can do for themselves. While it may be easier for you to tie their shoes or make their snack, you want them to learn to be both independent and responsible. Praise their efforts, help them as needed, and if you must do it for them, letting them know why today is different. Children from a very early age can both learn to and love to be helpful.

7. Parent as a team. Support and don't contradict each other in front of the kids. Children know which parent is more likely to give in on what issue. And since you don't want them playing one off the other, always insist that you both want to be asked together.

8. If you and your partner don't agree, discuss it first without your children present and only then with them. You can always say you have to think about things and get back to them later.

Being consistently consistent isn't always easy, but it definitely pays off. Not only will parenting be easier, but at some point your children will appreciate it as they better develop their skills to go out into the world and succeed.

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(Rick Nease/TNS)

Remember the class clown? Often parents only notice when children are not doing something. Notice good behavior and reward it... every time. Who doesn't like to be praised? It takes practice to do this consistently.

3. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Be clear and keep your message short and simple. Too many words confuse children. If you tell your child there will be a reward or a negative consequence as a result of his or her actions, make sure that you follow