

# Parenting with Wit and Wisdom

Barbara Coloroso

## Notes

• **Parenting children to think and act ethically** is three fold:

Giving them ways to care deeply, share generously, help willingly.

Curb their inclination to hoard or harm.

Stop in its tracks anything that fuels hatred.

• An ethic rooted in deep caring is primarily about relationships.

Principles, virtues and values are in the service to and at the service of that caring.

• The story about our human nature in today's social and cultural climate is part and parcel of our human nature and our social and cultural climate.

• Holding children accountable for what they do that causes harm, what they fail to do to care, and for what they turn a blind eye to says we care deeply about them. It also says that we believe they are capable of acting with integrity, civility, and compassion. That will require resolve on our part and discipline on theirs.

• **Discipline and Punishment—Why one works and the other only appears to work:**

**Punishment** is adult oriented, imposes power from without, arouses anger and resentment, invites more conflict, exacerbates wounds rather than heals them; is preoccupied with blame and pain; does not consider reasons or look for solutions; does something *to* a child; involves a strong element of judgment; and demonstrates a parent's ability to control a child.

**Discipline** is *not* judgmental, arbitrary, confusing, or coercive. It is not something we *do to* children. It is working *with* them. It is a process that gives life to a child's learning. It is restorative, and invites reconciliation. Its goal is to instruct, guide, and help children develop self-discipline—an ordering of the self from the inside, not an imposition from the outside.

• The *process* of discipline does four things the *act* of punishment cannot do:

1. Shows children what they have done.
2. Gives them as much ownership of the problem that they can handle.
3. Gives them options for solving the problem.
4. Leaves their dignity intact.

• For mistakes, mischief, and mayhem that unintentionally or intentionally create serious problems of great consequence, the **Three R's**—restitution, resolution, and reconciliation—are incorporated into the four steps of discipline.

• **R.S.V.P.** --Consequences need to be **Reasonable, Simple, Valuable, and Practical.**

- **Six Critical Life Messages**

I believe in you

I trust you

I know you can handle it

You are listened to

You are cared for

You are very important to me.

- **Philosophical Tenets**

Kids are worth it

I won't treat them in a way I  
would not want to be treated

If it works and leaves both of our dignity  
intact, do it.

- **Three Alternatives to *NO***

Yes, later.

Give me a minute

Convince me

- **Alternatives to Abundant Praise, Tangible Goodies,  
and our Presence as a Present:**

Encouragement

Feedback (compliments, comments, constructive criticism)

Deep caring (compassion and loving kindness)

Discipline

- **Big I and Three C's**—Intent, content, circumstances, and  
possible intended or unintended consequences.

If we conclude that our actions could harm another person and  
we commence to act; we come full circle to our intent to harm.

If we conclude that our actions could help relieve the suffering of  
the other, we have three choices: to not act (allowing suffering);  
to act because we want to maintain our image of a caring person  
(get caught); or to act to relieve the suffering of others, because  
*we must*.

- **T.A.O of Teaching: Time, Affection and Optimism**

- **Integrity**

Discern what is the right thing to do.

Be willing to act when the burden is heavy.

Be willing to speak up when it is more comfortable to be  
Silent.

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## Threats, Punishment, Bribes, and Rewards

Threats, punishment, bribes, and rewards are so common in our culture that we rarely question their efficacy. These four tools do work. They also keep a child dependent and fearful—dependent on a parent for rewards given for positive behaviour, and fearful of whatever punishment that same parent might mete out for negative behaviour. They work when our goal is to get children to do what we want them to do.

If, however, our goal is different—if we want our children to become ethical, compassionate, creative, competent individuals who have a strong sense of self, know how to think and not just what to think, who are naturally curious about themselves and the world around them, who don't "do to please" and are not easily led, who are willing to act with integrity—then these four tools do not work. Children have a difficult time becoming responsible, resourceful, and resilient if they are controlled, manipulated, and made to mind, robbed of their autonomy and denied opportunities to make choices and mistakes. They cannot develop a sense of inner discipline if all of the control comes from the outside.

### The Problems with Threats and Punishments

1. Impose control from without, arouse resentment, and invite more conflict.
2. Preempt more constructive ways of relating to a child and avoid dealing with the underlying causes of conflict.
3. Discourage children from acknowledging their actions.
4. Deprive children of the opportunity to understand the consequences of their actions, fix what they did, or empathize with the people they may have harmed.
5. Help children develop a right/wrong, good/bad distorted view of reality.
6. Increase tension in the home.
7. Rob children of their sense of dignity and self-worth.

Threats and punishment can take the form of:

- Isolation
- Embarrassment and humiliation
- Shaming
- Emotional isolation
- Grounding
- Brute force

The use of such negative reinforcement degrades, humiliates, and dehumanizes the children who are its objects. Threats and punishment do nothing to motivate a child to take risks, be creative, or speak up and speak out.

Faced with domination, manipulation, and control by someone bigger than themselves, children will respond in one of three ways:

1. Fear—doing as they are told out of dependency and fear.
2. Fight back—attacking the adult or taking the anger out on others.
3. Flee—running away mentally and physically.

With threats and punishment, children are robbed of the opportunity to develop their own inner discipline—the ability to act with integrity, wisdom, compassion, and mercy when there is no external force holding them accountable for what they do.

### Pitfalls of Praise

1. Praise can foster and reinforce a sense of insecurity, as children become fearful of not being able to live up to an adult's expectations.
2. Praise that exaggerates accomplishments can invite a child to use a low-risk strategy to avoid failure.
3. Praise can reduce children's confidence in their own answers.
4. Praise can undermine the integrity of the parent/child relationship.
5. Praise can stop a conversation.
6. Praise can invite a rebuttal.
7. Praise can condition children to go for a quick payoff, reducing innovative and complex reasoning.
8. Praise can discourage cooperative learning.
9. Praise that sets up competition gives children the idea that their self-worth and value in the family are contingent on whether they best their siblings or peers.

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## The Problems with Bribes and Rewards

1. Implied in the bribe is a threat of the possible loss of the reward.
2. Kids learn to do what they are told without question—not because they believe it is the right thing to do, but to get the reward or avoid the punishment.
3. Kids learn to “do to please.”
4. Responsible actions are performed for the payoff, not out of a sense of self-worth, self-control, and self-responsibility.
5. Kids are robbed of the opportunity to take risks, make mistakes, and question adults for fear of losing the promised rewards or losing their parents’ goodwill.
6. Kids who “do to please” have no deep understanding of the deeds they have done.
7. Deeds are done merely or mostly for the payoff, and siblings and peers are viewed as obstacles to a child’s personal success.

Kids who are consistently bribed and rewarded are likely to grow into adults who are overly dependent on others for approval and recognition, lacking their own self-confidence and sense of responsibility. They frame their deeds in response to the answers to the following questions:

- What’s in it for me?
- What’s the payoff?
- Does it count for anything?
- Will it get me what I want?
- Do you like it?
- Did you see me do it?
- Did I do it the right way (your way)?

Bribes and rewards can give us temporary compliance, but at the expense of creating less responsible, less resourceful, less resilient, less compassionate young people who will “do to please,” are praise-dependent, less generous, and less committed to excellence. These tools train children in selfishness and greed. Children learn what does and doesn’t get them what they want. They ask, “What’s in it for me?” not, “What kind of person do I want to be?” The virtues of integrity, honesty, kindness, and compassion become commodities that can be purchased at an ever inflated price.

Bribes and rewards come in all shapes and sizes, each with its own unique ability to manipulate and control. Each is able to rob children of their creativity, autonomy, sense of well-being, and connectedness to those around

them. The more any of these are needed or wanted by the child, the greater the potential impact.

The most common forms are:

1. Abundant praise
2. Tangible goodies
3. Our presence as a reward

Kids who are consistently bribed and rewarded will spend a lot of energy trying to figure out what they can do to please (or upset) their parents, and they will have no time or energy left to develop their own capacity to realistically evaluate their own abilities, deeds, and goals.

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## Is Your Child Reward-Dependent?

The following is a checklist of warning signs that your child might be reward-dependent. Most children will exhibit some of these signs as they struggle to develop their own sense of self. It is the frequency, intensity, and persistence of these behaviours that indicate a need for concern and intervention.

- \_\_\_ 1. "Does to please" to win approval of those in authority.
- \_\_\_ 2. Does what is told to do without questioning.
- \_\_\_ 3. Lacks initiative, waits for orders.
- \_\_\_ 4. Sense of self is defined externally; has dignity and worth when producing what adults want.
- \_\_\_ 5. Who she is and what she does are one and the same. If she does something "bad," she sees herself as "bad."
- \_\_\_ 6. Uses his history as an excuse for his behaviour.
- \_\_\_ 7. Is pessimistic, desponds easily.
- \_\_\_ 8. Places blame outside of self: "He made me do it." "It's not my fault."
- \_\_\_ 9. Hides mistakes, fearful of adults' wrath.
- \_\_\_ 10. Lies to avoid consequences and cover mistakes.
- \_\_\_ 11. Feels controlled.
- \_\_\_ 12. Feels worthwhile only when on top, when number one.
- \_\_\_ 13. Is competitive, gets ahead at the expense of others.
- \_\_\_ 14. Needs to be perfect, views mistakes as bad.
- \_\_\_ 15. Seeks approval and fears disapproval, fearful of rejection.
- \_\_\_ 16. Is conformist. Goes along with the crowd.
- \_\_\_ 17. Considers behaviour by its consequences. "If I don't get caught, what I did wasn't wrong."
- \_\_\_ 18. Focuses on the past and the future, misses the moment. Worries about "what if . . ."
- \_\_\_ 19. Experiences self-talk that is negative; parental injunctions keep playing over and over.
- \_\_\_ 20. Has private reservations about public self: "If they really knew me . . ."
- \_\_\_ 21. Uses only simple problem-solving skills to try to solve all problems.
- \_\_\_ 22. Is always concerned about the "bottom line."
- \_\_\_ 23. Says what she thinks others want to hear.
- \_\_\_ 24. Is cautious, insecure.
- \_\_\_ 25. Has a mercenary spirit; is selfish, self-centered, greedy, does good deeds to obtain rewards or avoid punishment.
- \_\_\_ 26. Is cynical and skeptical; views world in terms of "us" and "them."
- \_\_\_ 27. Swallows values without question from those in authority.
- \_\_\_ 28. Frames deeds with "should."
- \_\_\_ 29. Holds on to resentments.
- \_\_\_ 30. Is oversensitive to criticism, disqualifies compliments.

## Is Your Child Responsible, Resourceful, Resilient, and Compassionate?

The following is a checklist of indicators that your child is developing a strong, healthy sense of self.

- \_\_\_ 1. Acts out of a sense of conviction.
- \_\_\_ 2. Makes choices; willing to stand up for a value or against an injustice even in the face of disapproval.
- \_\_\_ 3. Takes initiative; does not wait for an adult to approve or affirm.
- \_\_\_ 4. Has an internally defined sense of self. Lives consciously, purposefully.
- \_\_\_ 5. Accepts responsibility for decisions, choices, and mistakes.
- \_\_\_ 6. Accepts the past, learns from it, and lets it go.
- \_\_\_ 7. Is optimistic. Has realistic expectations, positive outlook.
- \_\_\_ 8. Takes ownership of behaviour and accepts consequences.
- \_\_\_ 9. Takes ownership of mistakes and sees them as opportunities to learn.
- \_\_\_ 10. Is truthful and realistic.
- \_\_\_ 11. Feels empowered and self-directed.
- \_\_\_ 12. Celebrates and cherishes success of self and others.
- \_\_\_ 13. Is competent, cooperative, decisive; knows own abilities; is willing to share; is open to others' ideas.
- \_\_\_ 14. Is willing to take risks.
- \_\_\_ 15. Has a strong sense of self, is open to criticism and compliments, measures both in relation to core identity.
- \_\_\_ 16. Is self-reliant.
- \_\_\_ 17. Possesses personal integrity, self-respect.
- \_\_\_ 18. Experiences life, lives consciously.
- \_\_\_ 19. Experiences self-talk that is upbeat, realistic, positive, accepting.
- \_\_\_ 20. Is confident and self-expressive; listens to internal signals (intuitive).
- \_\_\_ 21. Uses innovative and complex reasoning when appropriate, explores, goes beyond conventional ideas, is creative.
- \_\_\_ 22. Is playful; everything doesn't have to have a purpose.
- \_\_\_ 23. Is willing to speak out and share ideas even if not sure how anyone else is going to react.
- \_\_\_ 24. Is confident, self-assured.
- \_\_\_ 25. Is altruistic, ethical, and compassionate; attends to others' feelings and points of view.
- \_\_\_ 26. Has a pro-social orientation, a generalized inclination to share, care, and help.
- \_\_\_ 27. Examines values before accepting them as own.
- \_\_\_ 28. Frames deeds with "could."
- \_\_\_ 29. Lets go of real or perceived hurt.
- \_\_\_ 30. Can accept criticism and compliments equally well.

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## Mistakes, Mischief, and Mayhem

How we respond to our children's many mistakes, occasional mischief, and rare mayhem can help provide the wherewithal for our children to become responsible, resourceful, resilient, compassionate humans who feel empowered to act with integrity and a strong sense of self, or to become masters of excuses, blaming, and denial who feel powerless, manipulated, and out of control.

Whether they feel empowered or powerless will greatly influence their ability to handle the myriad traumas they will experience throughout their lives, traumas brought about through death, divorce, illness, natural disaster, broken friendships, loss of a job, or mistakes, mischief, and mayhem they create themselves.

## Punishment, Rescuing, Discipline

For mistakes, mischief, or mayhem that intentionally or unintentionally create serious problems of great consequence, the three R's of reconciliation are incorporated into the four steps of discipline. These three R's—Restitution, Resolution, and Reconciliation—provide the tools necessary to begin the healing process when serious material or personal harm has occurred. Whether it is only the four steps or the four steps and the three R's, discipline deals with the reality of the situation, not with the power and control of the adult. It helps change attitudes and habits that might have led to the conflict, and it promotes genuine peace in the home.

Discipline involves intervention to keep a child from further harming himself or others, or real-world consequences, or a combination of the two. Real-world consequences either happen naturally or are reasonable consequences that are intrinsically related to the child's action. Discipline by its nature requires more energy on

the part of the child than on the part of the adult. If a consequence is RSVP—Reasonable, Simple, Valuable, and Practical—it will invite responsible actions from the child. If it isn't all four of these, it probably won't be effective and it could be punishment disguised as a reasonable consequence.

Often such disguised punishment is predetermined and is based on the assumption that all violations are clear-cut. Violations are subject to a one-size-fits-all punishment, regardless of the intent of the violator. In our rush to swift and certain judgment, there is no place for discernment of intent; the deed is seen only as a violation of a rule. Even a mistake unpunished is looked upon as a possible misstep down the slippery slope to more violent deeds. Such a mentality of zero-tolerance creates an environment of zero-options for parents. It is a simplistic response to complicated actions. It wrongly presumes that a young offender created the mayhem with the foresight, judgment, and maturity of an adult.

The opposite extreme (punishment's alter ego) is rescuing a child because we believe that children are incapable of wrongdoing with malevolent intent. We make light of the incident, ignore it entirely, or make excuses for the behaviour. If we don't draw attention to it, maybe it will just go away. This is just as wrongheaded as the punitive approach. Overcome by the sympathy we feel for the perpetrator, we try to convince ourselves that if we only knew the why of the child's misdeeds and the history that preceded the mischief or mayhem, we would be compelled to forgive and forget. Punishment ignores intent; rescuing ignores the severity of the deed.

Discipline is a more constructive and compassionate response that takes into consideration the intent, the severity of the deed, and the restorative steps needed to give life to the child's learning and to heal relationships that might have been harmed. It invites us to respond to our children with mindfulness, reason, a wise heart, compassion, and mercy, instead of just reacting with logic or emotion. It enables all of us to go beyond mere repair to restitution, resolution, and reconciliation.

During times of chaos and loss, it is children who have experienced such discipline, instead of punishment, who will have an inner reserve or resource to draw on when their strength is sapped, their intellect assaulted by the answerless questions, their emotions thrown into turmoil by raw, piercing grief.

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## Nonviolent Engagement and Reconciliatory Justice

When youngsters create mayhem intentionally, or through their mistakes and mischiefs at home or in the community, neither harsh punishments nor full pardon will heal the victims or the perpetrators of the mayhem. It is nonviolent engagement that is at the heart of true reconciliatory justice: the willingness to confront wrongdoing and reach out to the wrongdoer. It refuses to allow us to divide our world and our relationships into “us” and “them.” It denies us the myopic vision that limits our insight. It reminds us of our connectedness with one another and can point the way out of an impasse that bitterness and hatred have created.

In *Prisons that Could Not Hold: Prison Notes 1964–Seneca 1984*, Barbara Deming, a civil rights activist, speaks about how “. . . nonviolence gives us two hands upon the oppressor—one hand taking from him what is not his due, the other slowly calming him as we do this.” The one hand keeps the offender from causing more harm to self or others; the other calms down the offender, allows time for reflection, and invites reconciliation. As our two hands reach out, there is at once an attempt to bring about a balance and a tension created that keeps both parties actively engaged in the reconciliatory process as we strive to heal the rift created. We are attempting to restore community.

When a mistake results in serious harm, our arm of compassion reaches the farthest, while the arm of mindfulness helps the child acknowledge what has happened, confront the feelings of sadness, guilt, and fear, and take responsibility for the action, as well as rise above what has happened and get on with her life.

When mischief results in mayhem, the two arms are extended equally. Compassion and mindfulness are both equally needed.

When a child commits intentional mayhem, the arm of mindfulness is the longest at the beginning of the reconciliatory process, while the arm of compassion is still there.

The end goal in all three instances is an embrace in which the kids take responsibility as is warranted, are willing to make restitution, resolve to keep the mischief and mayhem from happening again, and commit to once again becoming active participants in the community. In

the embrace, we are ready and willing to have them as participating members of our community.

For the youngster whose mistake or mischief has resulted in serious damage or harm, we might be inclined to offer only the arm of compassion. This will deprive the child of any opportunity to heal from within. She is likely to beat herself up emotionally, psychologically, and perhaps physically for the harm she has caused and can't fix.

How young offenders are treated will influence what kind of people they will grow up to be and what kind of lives the rest of us will live. If we don't help them reconcile with the community, we could well condemn ourselves to a lifetime of fear, distrust, and mayhem.

When an entire community is committed to reconciliatory justice, young offenders are invited to rise above their misdeeds and violent acts. The goal is to mend and restore rather than isolate and punish. The search is not for vengeance but for ways to heal people and heal relationships.

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not a verb, nor is it an act of the will. Forgiveness is the voice of the heart that speaks the presence of the soul. It is heart business—the mind will be busy enough working out ways to demonstrate the forgiveness through deeds, actions, releasing debt, and making real the tangible expression of forgiveness.

Reconciliatory justice is a visible expression of forgiveness and the act of healing in a community. It is perhaps the one tool that can begin to cut through the chains of violence. It does not excuse the violence, does not deny the dignity and worth of the victim or the humanity of the oppressor. It does justice to the suffering without perpetuating the hatred. It is the triumph of mindfulness and compassion over vengeance and retribution.

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## Bribe, Threats, Rewards and Punishment Related Research Studies

1. The Swiss nuclear incentive study, titled “The Cost of Price Incentives: An Empirical Analysis of Motivation Crowding-Out,” was conducted by Bruno S. Frey and Felix Oberholzer-Gee. It was published in the *American Economic Review* 87 (1997): 746-55.

2. The GMAT study conducted in Haifa, Israel, can be found in Uri Gneezy and Aldo Rustichini’s “Pay Enough or Don’t Pay at All,” published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115 (2000): 791-810.

3. The role of the nucleus accumbens, “Anticipation of Increasing Monetary Reward Selectively Recruits Nucleus Accumbens,” by Brian Knutson, Charles Adams, Grace Fong, and Daniel Hommer. The study was published in the *Journal of Neuroscience* 21 (2001): 1-5.

4. The study exploring the neurological aspects of altruism is titled “Altruism Is Associated with an Increased Neural Response to Agency.” It was conducted by Dharol Tankersley, Jill Stowe, and Scott A. Huettel and published in *Nature Neuroscience* 10 (2007): 150-51.

5. The pilot study conducted at Community High School in Michigan, see “Teacher Performance Incentives and Student Outcomes,” by Randall Eberts, Kevin Hollenbeck, and Joe Stone, published in the *Journal of Human Resources* 37 (2002): 913-27.

6. The economics paper suggesting that rewards are addictive, “Addiction to Rewards,” was written in 2003 by Anton Souvorov at the University of Toulouse.

7. The meta-analysis study suggesting that rewards interfere with intrinsic motivation when they are presented in a quid pro quo fashion is titled “Extrinsic Rewards and Intrinsic Motivation in Education: Reconsidered Once Again.” Authored by Edward L. Deci, Richard Koestner, and Richard M. Ryan, it was published in *Review of Educational Research* 71 (2001): 1-27.

Studies summarized in *Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior*, by Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman, Broadway Books, New York, 2008.