



Gentle discipline - February 2007

To smack or not to smack? For child psychologist Nicole Pierotti the jury is in. The verdict? Praising works better than punishing.

Smacking is one of the great debates when it comes to dealing with discipline. Many a heated conversation has been had about the right or wrongness of smacking. My advice is there are better and more effective ways to change your child's poor behaviour.

Let me ask you this question – why do you smack? You will find the answer to be either you're so annoyed with your child's behaviour it's an impulsive reaction or you don't know what alternative discipline to use. If smacking really worked, you would only have to use it a few times and the behaviour would stop. But in my experience, what ends up happening is parents find themselves smacking more and more and with greater frustration as it doesn't seem to be working.

If you as a parent are smacking, then you are playing the 'I'm going to make you game'. But children don't play that game (only we adults). Children play the 'I'll do whatever you take notice of game'. So they do something, you react and a memory is created. Their mind says, 'Mum took notice – I'll do that again!'. It doesn't matter if the behaviour is good or poor. So what do you take most notice of – good or poor behaviour?

Rather than punishing poor behaviour, start looking for good behaviour and praising it (heavily at the start). You need to become an expert in this and all you need is practice. You will see for yourself the great affect it has on children. Be sure to describe what they have done well. For example: "You've taken your dishes to the sink – that's great!" Smile and look them in the eye. And, to make this reward even more effective, at the same time include a pat on the back or a hug.

The second half of the equation is ignoring poor behaviour. This can be difficult if there is a lot of bad behaviour but you'll find the behaviour decreases once you're paying less attention. This includes siblings fighting. Often they'll keep fighting till you step in to 'sort it out'. But instead of helping, this just paid off for your children. Remember the 'Mum took notice – I'll do that again'? One of the most effective strategies here is to remove yourself from the room and place your attention elsewhere.

Practice these alternative strategies every day. That way, when you're stressed, you'll be able to remember and make use of them. You may be surprised to discover it doesn't take much effort to change the way you parent and improve your child's behaviour.