

# A Conversation about...

# DISCIPLINE



July 2014

## Feature Article

Child-Honouring  
Discipline p3

- Dr Justin Coulson

Two Alternative  
Views p14

- Kiara Pirola

## SmartLoving

Smart Parents p20

Seasonal Notes p24



Jul 2014



This Month...

Th 3	St Thomas the Apostle
Su 6	<b>Ordinary Time 14 Compassion</b>
Mo 7	Bl Peter to Rot
Su 13	<b>Ordinary Time 15 Good Soil</b>
We 16	Our Lady of Mt Carmel
Su 20	<b>Ordinary Time 16 The Kingdom of Heaven</b>
Fr 25	St James the Apostle
Sa 26	Sts Joachim & Anne
Su 25	<b>Ordinary Time 17 Treasure!</b>
Tu 29	St Martha
Th 31	St Ignatius of Loyola

# From the Editor...

If you really want to get people arguing about parenting, just say the 'D-word'. Even talking about this around the office has revealed a variety of differing opinions and approaches to discipline, all passionately advocated!

There is more to parenting than just discipline but for some reason, this seems to be the most sensitive area with a huge amount of emotion, childhood memories and in some cases emotional and psychological injury attached to it.

**With this in mind, we've asked our regular parenting expert, Dr Justin Coulson, to present his approach to the topic. We've also referenced a number of alternative view points. And we'd love to hear your thoughts as well.**



# Child-Honouring Discipline

Dr Justin Coulson

**Think for a moment about the ways you discipline your children when they act in challenging ways.**

Perhaps your three year-old has just stabbed his older brother in the face with a fork. Or maybe your teenage daughter has screamed an obscenity at her younger sibling. Or you've just discovered your eight year-old is pocketing coins from your purse to spend at the tuckshop. Or maybe it's just that you've asked and asked and darned-well asked time and again for 'those shoes to be put away' and no one has listened.



Dr Justin Coulson PhD is a parenting expert and the author of *What Your Child Needs From You: Creating a Connected Family* available from ACER press. He is available for speaking engagements via his website. Justin and his wife Kylie are the parents of 6 children.



Do you feel that you are incessantly nagging, shouting, pleading, threatening, and demanding that your children do as you have asked? Do you live in a dictatorship – where the kids are in charge? This e-book offers simple strategies and ideas for disciplining your children in ways that work, and that reduce or eliminate parental guilt.

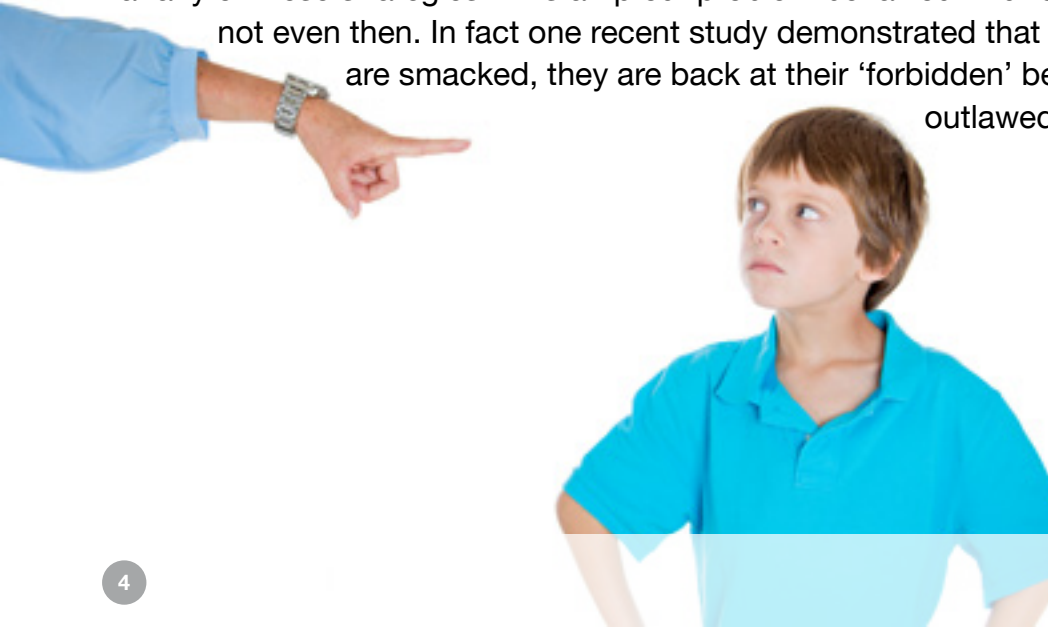
## What are our standard methods for disciplining our children?

When I ask this question at my parenting workshops, the responses are predictable. With a mild degree of shame and guilt, parents confess that they raise their voices – a lot. And they use threats. Lots.

Then the big guns come out. Parents use withdrawal of privileges, time out (or solitary confinement – which the UN has indicated is a violation of human rights, but we use it daily in our homes), and even smacking.

## My next question is this: What are the results of these discipline methods?

Most parents point out that the challenging behaviour stops. And it's true. Research tells us quite plainly that any of these strategies will stamp out problem behaviour. But only when we're around. And often not even then. In fact one recent study demonstrated that in 74% of cases where children are smacked, they are back at their 'forbidden' behaviour (or something else equally outlawed) within 10 minutes.



But there are other issues with these forms of 'discipline'. Not only do they not really work, but they:

- drive a wedge in our relationships with our children
- undermine our children's sense of worth
- drive unwanted behaviour underground (kids just get sneakier)
- model anger and aggression as the solution to difficult situations. Power gets results is the lesson they learn.
- create resentment, fear, sadness, and more anger (emotions are contagious)
- eventually stop working as kids get bigger and less fearful of our power
- stop children learning.

## Yet we persist in using them. Why?

In my workshops on discipline, I often invite participants to draw a picture of a house. Everyone draws essentially the same thing:

In fact, that is a much better version than what I typically see. But why is it that we, as adults, draw the same house we were drawing as 6 year-olds?

When I ask the question, these are the responses I get:

- It's quick
- It's easy
- It doesn't require any thought
- I only had a minute to get it done
- It's how I've always done it
- It's how I was taught
- I don't have the skills to do it any better than that



**I suggest that the way we draw houses (and the excuses we give for drawing them so poorly) is correlated with the way we discipline.**

We go with those typical reactions I described earlier (yelling, threatening, grounding, time out, hitting) because they're quick, easy, require no thought, require limited time, and it's how we were taught and how we've always done it. Perhaps most poignantly, it's because we don't think we have the skills to do it any better.

Those standard disciplinary techniques really require no skill, no effort, no thought, no perspective, and no compassion. And they don't really do the job particularly well – just like most of my workshop participants don't draw houses very well.

**But what if we could learn the skills? What if we could discipline in ways that were powerfully effective?**





# What is discipline, anyway?

Most parents I speak to tell me that discipline means “punishment”. And when we discipline our children it’s our duty to mete out punishment to teach our children a lesson. But what do they learn? Not a great deal, evidently, because they’re usually up to no good again in next to no time – but now they feel worse about themselves.

**In fact, research tells us that punishment is the least effective way for us to teach our kids anything at all.**

I define discipline as ‘teaching our children good ways to act’. Our standard discipline practices don’t teach good ways to act. We model terrible behaviour based around power and control when we go with those standard practices.

If we want to teach good ways to act so our children are disciplined, what should we do instead?



## Shouldn't there be consequences when our children do the wrong thing? Shouldn't they have to pay a price?

I don't believe so. I see the idea as misguided puritanicalism. Evangelists for punishment seem to have an overindulged sense of justice and a myopic view of mercy.

Research suggests an alternative solution that I believe is far more effective at teaching our children good ways to act – to discipline them. It's called “**autonomy supportive parenting**”. Here is how it works:

### **1. Provide a rationale for behavioural requests.**

All too often we tell our children what to do with no explanation. It should be obvious that hitting siblings or failing to share is bad for family harmony, but it helps when we explain why. Compliance increases when everyone is on the same page. Whether it is cleaning something up, or being kind, a rationale makes a difference.



PLEASE KEEP THIS DOOR  
CLOSED AT ALL TIMES AS  
IT REGULATES THE AIR  
CONDITIONING  
THANK YOU



**2. Understand the situation from your child's perspective.** Recently I asked my daughter to do something. I explained why it was important. She responded that she could see what I was saying, but her point of view was different to mine. We talked it through. My request had not taken into account how she might be affected. Sometimes perspectives are irrelevant. Seatbelts must be worn – even by angry toddlers. But often we can be more flexible – or at least more understanding – than we typically allow.



### **3. Offer choices and encourage initiative**

One of the most powerful things we can do when we come to a challenging situation with a child is to give them choice. “What do you think is the best way forward?” You will be surprised to see that good answers are often inside of them.

### **4. Minimise the use of controlling techniques.**

Contrary to common sense, it seems that the more we attempt to control and compel our children to act certain ways, the more they resent it and the more they resist it. By encouraging a self-determining approach, our children are more likely to set their own rules (with our guidance) and stick to them.



# Putting it into practice

Recently my daughter showed me her phone as part of our 'random monitoring' agreement. She has a phone all to herself. She allows me periodic access when I randomly ask to ensure that things are being used safely.

My daughter was using an app I was very uncomfortable with. I asked her to please stop using it. I told her I had grave concerns about pornography spammers, and other unsavoury content being served up. I expected her to remove the app. (That's step 1 from above).

She responded by telling me she disagreed. I listened carefully (that's step 2) and non-defensively. Rather than trying to prove myself correct, I asked her questions to see why she felt so strongly.

Then I asked her, "How do we work through this then? We want different outcomes." (That's step 3). She and I talked about different ways she might keep the app and stay safe. We agreed to a range of measures that left me feeling that she was safe and making wise decisions, and left her feeling trusted and honoured.

And from time to time I check her phone as part of our monitoring agreement – with the proviso that I won't delete anything, but that instead we'll discuss things.



## The difference between approaches

I could, as some parenting experts suggest, grow a digital spine and tell my daughter she doesn't have a phone if she doesn't play by my rules. I suspect that she would be very clever and make sure I never caught her doing the wrong thing. But there would be no trust in our relationship, and she would almost certainly still find ways to use that app. All I would succeed in doing is that I would have driven that unwanted behaviour underground. She would be sneaky. She would use other people's phones. She would delete the app each night and re-load it each morning. Our relationship would be built on avoidance.

Now, however, we are open. We communicate. We trust. We check in. My daughter understands what I'm concerned about and accommodates me. And I honour her perspectives and guide her towards making good decisions.

**I'm not advocating permissiveness. In fact, if you look carefully at the process, it is heavily engaging, and requires high levels of parental nurturance and admonition. I am guiding – clearly and directly. But I'm doing it in a way that reflects an understanding of my daughter's perspective.**





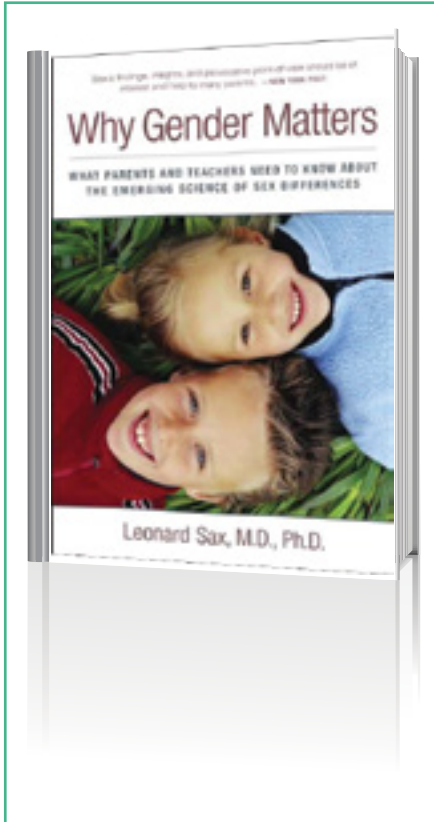
# A Concluding thought...

Discipline like this can take a long time at first. But when we honour relationships and take the time to carefully teach our children, discipline gets faster and faster over time. But even more valuable – our relationships get stronger and stronger at the time when our children need us the most.



# Alternative View #1

Summarised by Kiara Pirola



*Dr Leonard Sax, a psychologist and family physician explains the physiological differences between boys and girls and how we ignore them at our peril. Using solid research he demonstrates that these differences need not be a limitation but are the key to effective teaching and parenting. This comprehensive book covers a range of areas and is well worth reading for any parent or educator in it's entirety.*

*We've summarised the eighth chapter on discipline here.*

## **Authority Transferred**

A sociologist named Norbert Elias who is considered one of the great social critics of the 20th Century noticed a fundamental shift in our society during the 20th Century. In 1989 he observed authority in the family unit was **transferred from the parent to the child**. This loss has made it somewhat easier to be friends with your children but it is harder to be their parent. A friendship is a reciprocal relationship between peers. The parent-child relationship is not and it certainly should not be.



If you shouldn't be your child's best friend and you don't have the authority to be their parent you are in limbo. It is a place of **a pervasive feeling of uncertainty**. Like adults, most children prefer the certainty of what they know rather than the uncertainty of something they have never experienced. The key to effectively asserting your parental authority is to not only use it to discipline them, but also to introduce them to new experiences, hobbies and adventures and to reward good behaviour.

**Your job as a parent is not to maximise your child's pleasure, but to broaden their horizons. This is how you positively discipline your child and assert your authority.**

## **The punishment must fit the Crime– and the gender and the age**

Whilst positive discipline (modeling good behaviour, rewarding it and gently discouraging bad behaviour) is essential, what do you do when your child does something that requires sterner measures?

**A study looking at the impact of disciplinary styles ranging from strict to permissive demonstrated that girls and boys responded very differently.**

Boys responded very well to stricter discipline that included an occasional spanking (of course, none of these families used abusive punishment). The stricter the parent's disciplinary style, the better the boy's social-cognitive skills were. A 'warm and fuzzy' approach to discipline appeared to retard boy's social-cognitive development.



For girls, the results were just the opposite. The ‘warm and fuzzy’ approach promoted social skills where as strict discipline had a slight negative effect on girl’s social development.

Researchers have also found that parents largely tend to be permissive with boys and strict with girls. Other studies have also demonstrated that children themselves understand that different styles are more effective on each gender. Children approved of Induction Techniques (how would you feel if some one slapped you?) when the transgressor was a girl and Power Assertion Techniques when the transgressor was a boy.

Sax then lists a breakdown of available techniques based on the child’s age and gender. He doesn’t advocate for any particular system of techniques or philosophies but does point out that some techniques are not appropriate developmentally at different ages for boys and girls. For example:

- Spanking is NEVER appropriate or effective for girls of any age. If I may quote: “Never spank a girl. Period.” (p 188)
- For boys, spanking can be used appropriately if verbal correction and timeouts have not curbed the behaviour. Dr Sax strictly defines spanking as two swats on the behind and no more. Corporal punishment of any kind for boys older than 10 is not appropriate.
- Induction Techniques, (eg. How would you like it if you got slapped?) are effective for girls from ages 2 and up. For boys however, induction techniques are only effective after age 10. However, the question needs to be rephrased slightly, instead of “how would you feel...?” ask “What would you do if...?”
- If you used privilege withdrawal, pronounce your judgement and stick to it! Even if in hindsight it may have been a little harsh. Negotiation of disciplinary matters under the age of 10 is not appropriate as it subverts the child’s moral internalisation of good and bad behaviour.

# Is spanking a form of child abuse?

Dr Sax does not encourage spanking but does not unequivocally oppose it where both parents consider it appropriate. A study he cites measured the outcomes of children who's parents used corporal punishment. They also ascertained the level of parental involvement. The key determinate of good behaviour was the degree of parental involvement in the child's life. The study also demonstrated that parents who used harsh corporal punishment were more likely to be uninvolved in their child's life. The child's poor outcomes doesn't appear to be the result of spanking itself per se, but the lack of parental involvement.

*We highly recommend you purchase and read the book for futher information. The second chapter on male-female brain differences is truly eye-opening.*



# Alternative View #2...

Summarised by Kiara Pirola

*Pascal Emmanuel Gobry is a writer and entrepreneur with a keen interest in Catholic theology and spirituality. He is also a husband and a father to a daughter.*

*He writes a regular blog on Patheos entitled Inebriate Me. The article we have summarised here was first published June 6th 2014.*

## Spanking is Intrinsicly Disordered

This article takes a moral theology perspective, arguing that spanking is intrinsicly disordered. That is, it is always against God's will. That does not mean that if you spank your children you are a monster or that *you* are disordered. There can be extenuating circumstances or simple ignorance. However, Gobry argues that spanking is not necessary given the range of alternatives.

The family is more than just a social unit, it is an icon of the Trinity and violence of any kind (even if it is well meaning) should not be acceptable even as a necessary evil.

Gobry argues that our job as parents is to raise adults that are faithful and virtuous.



This means fostering our child's intrinsic motivation to be good (That is, you are motivated to be good because you want to be a good person). Some of our disciplinary techniques put extrinsic motivation (that is, I'll be good because I'll get into trouble if I don't or I'll get gold stars and a treat) at the centre and inhibit your child's ability to be intrinsically motivated.

Spanking says to a child that you must do what is right or you will be punished. It tells a child that right and wrong are not ends in themselves, but a system to be gamed to maximise reward and avoid punishment.

Children should have rules and those rules should be enforced without question because the rules are not ends in themselves but are there to help children flourish. In between the authoritarian, controlling parent and the permissive, anything goes parent is the parent with simple authority with a simple set of principles that are consistently enforced.

**Yes we do need rules and indeed rewards and punishments. But we need them far less often than we think.**





# Smart Parents

Byron & Francine Pirola

*It's 3am and Bron and James are in a standoff. Their toddler has woken for the third time that night and is not interested in going back to sleep. Demand feeding worked well for the first six months, but now, she is 11 months old and the sleep deprivation is taking its toll. Bron wants to take a firmer hand – put the baby into the cot and let her cry; she's not hungry, sick, dirty or wet, she insists. James doesn't agree. Their daughter's plaintive whimpering tears at his heart and even though he has an early start and desperately needs sleep, he can't stand to hear her cry. And this is not the first time they've had this argument. Bron hangs her head in her hands – why is this so hard? she wonders as James grumpily takes the baby out of the cot to the lounge room. She weeps softly as the realisation dawns that it will be the same every night until the baby 'grows out' of the night feeds.*





Parenting and in particular, discipline, is a contentious issue for many couples. Parenting opinions can be deeply engrained and emotionally loaded. Some couples resolve it by one spouse giving way to the other and others wrestle over every difference. What's worse, most new parents are chronically sleep deprived eroding their capacity for expansive thinking and generosity. Here are five tips for navigating these troubled waters.

## 1. Unity between husband and wife is paramount.

Parenting experts say over and over that parenting style (eg permissive verses strict) is not nearly as important as consistency between husband and wife. When Mum and Dad have different standards, kids learn to play one off the other. So get on the same page as much as possible. This means doing a bit of pre-emptive planning because the worst time to attempt resolving your parenting differences is in the heat of the moment, with a toddler having a melt-down in the supermarket or a teenager waiting for permission for a sleepover.





## 2. Practice what you preach.

It's kind of obvious, but your attempts to parent and provide boundaries won't be respected if you routinely disregard your own rules. If you don't want your teens drinking, model responsible drinking. If you want your child to go to bed at a reasonable hour, make sure you do too.

## 3. Examine your parenting formation.

We all come into parenthood with beliefs and expectations about what constitutes good parenting. Sometimes this is adopted from our family of origin experience and sometimes it is the direct opposite of what our parents did. The question is: are you freely choosing the behaviour from a place of rationality? Most times, even when we reject a value from our family of origin, we do so compulsively. Be intentional about what you choose to adopt or reject into your parenting repertoire.

## 4. Educate yourself.

When it comes to parenting, everyone's an 'expert' – we've all been parented and we all believe that the experience of being a child makes us qualified to be a parent. The truth is, a lot of parenting wisdom is based on myth, speculation or plain old “we've always done it this way” defensiveness. Get updated from the true experts – those who have made it their life-time study.

## 5. Tailor your response for each child.

Some might think that by the time a couple gets to their third or fourth child that they have the parenting thing all worked out. Remember, every child is unique and will require a tailored response. For example, among our children, some responded better when we removed access to pocket money, while for others, grounding was more effective.



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# Join the Conversation...

Thanks for staying with us so far!

If you'd like to continue the conversation please do so! The comment box is open as is our Facebook page! We all have strong opinions on the matter so let's keep it civil and loving.

Feel free to check out our resources available for feasts this month.



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