

## ***A PARENT'S GAME PLAN***

### ***Discipline yourselves to learn to be more effective***

By Dianne Savage. Intelligencer Journal Correspondent

**I**t's an age-old question. And one many parents don't like to confront. How to discipline your child?

Sure there's a history of techniques like threats and spankings that require children to obediently comply through fear and intimidation.

There's the school of consequences, of punishment and rewards, and strategies like enforcing "time-outs." Yet these methods lead to a reliance on external limits rather than self-discipline.

There's even the thought that piling on the praise, creating a "good job culture" will help a child's self-esteem enough so the child won't need to act out. Yet instead can create "praise junkies".

And there's the laid-back method of offering plenty of choices, hoping the young child will pick the desired behavior. It's a method that can be at first confusing to children, and then leads to a sense instant gratification, creating "entitlement monsters".

Two child educators, Kim John Payne and Jack Petrash, believe there's a more natural, commonsensical solution to the dilemma of discipline – one that engages the child at a developmentally appropriate level and builds a foundation to draw upon from toddlerhood through the teenage years.

Payne and Petrash will present their methods and offer solutions to discipline problems at a two-day conference March 11-12 at the Susquehanna Waldorf School in Marietta. Although it will appeal to parents, the conference is also designed to meet the needs of teachers, coaches, health care workers and counselors.

Through their presentations, "The Soul of Discipline" and "A Developmental Roadmap," the two will delve into the deeper issues behind discipline decisions and discuss age-appropriate behavior.

Both approach the issues of child rearing in a three-fold way. They divide childhood into three developmental stages, each with its own needs. They address the needs of the young child, the grade school child, and the teenager. "One of the things that I feel is important to convey to parents is that the long journey of childhood goes through three different stages and at each stage something different is asked of us," says Petrash. "When something is difficult, I can be a much better parent when I see things coming. What I hope to do is point out places where it can be tricky to parent and give strategies for these moments."

By linking discipline styles to child development, Petrash and Payne say their strategies meet the child's needs without leading to conflict. Both espouse

solving family problems out of healthy reflection rather than a provoked reaction. Payne says that by “maintaining an awareness of age-appropriate responses and conversations, and by using incentives, daily goals, boundaries, agreements, and immediate feedback, it is possible to produce an effective formula for each age.” Payne, an internationally lauded author and psychologist, has helped children in third world countries survive traumatic events, helped violent juvenile offenders in halfway houses, and even helped children conquer emotional and attention disorders.

“Whenever I am asked to give a presentation, I talk about how discipline is one of the best ways to help children feel safe when they’re feeling stressed or vulnerable. It can create a real feeling of being held,” he says. He will discuss the history of changing parenting and discipline styles over the years, on March 11 from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.

“It is so revealing to explore discipline styles past and present, from the old ‘blind obedience,’ to behavior modifications based on punishment and reward, or even to our present day behavior affirmation, often expressed as the “good job” culture,” he says.

He will explore the downfalls of each of these styles, then lead into his own, “embarrassingly simple, common sense” methods for creating calm and safety through discipline. “Firstly, training creative compliance for the young child, secondly, building emotional skills for the elementary age, and lastly, for the teenager, managing critical choices,” he says.

Petrash, an educator for more than 30 years, will complement Payne’s presentation with a Saturday, March 12 workshop from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Petrash says that “because so many of our parenting and teaching challenges occur naturally as part of child development it is possible to anticipate these difficulties and to prepare for them in advance. For discipline to be effective it must always begin with preventive discipline.”

Petrash and Payne will focus on establishing a kind of discipline that is “both nurturing and effective” for each of the three stages of childhood.

### ***For the young child, what we do matters***

“With a young child, they look to what we do. They learn through imitation. They don’t have any mediation, just take it in, so that what they see is what they become,” says Petrash. “So it’s important for parents to understand that what they do in front of children is what children will do. This is why so often abused children grow up to be abusers. It’s what’s been modeled for them.”

Payne’s disciplining strategy at this point is what he terms “creative compliance.” He says that in these early years a parent’s job is to train children to accept rules and adult direction. Much of this is done through modeling the behavior parents want children to imitate. He says it is also important to give young children a

chance to correct their worst mistakes with “do overs” rather than giving them harsh punishments.

“I caution strongly against behavior modification with young children. There’s a danger of overusing time-outs,” he says. “I also look at the problem of drowning children in affirmation.”

Payne says what’s effective is “the magic pause.” “What that means is standing inside every request you make. Avoiding on the fly requests. Not making requests you’re not willing to lay on the railway tracks about.” When making requests, Payne says it’s important to first pause and make sure “you’re willing to do what it takes to have this done.”

Then, he says it’s important that the request is small and manageable, that you’re willing to stay close and follow through. And he advocates cutting down the number of requests you make of children and instead promoting compliance wordlessly as you guide your child to the right decisions.

“At this stage in parenting, it’s important to realize that actions speak louder than words,” says Petrash, who adds that the common mistake parents of young children make is to talk to them too much.

Both say that it’s important to establish a good foundation of discipline at this stage, before your child moves to the next.

### ***For the grade school child, what we feel matters***

“As children mature, they tune into a parent’s inner life,” says Petrash. “Often when we come home from work we’re preoccupied with the cares of day, and it’s hard to clear the deck and be open and in a buoyant emotional place. Especially for dads, it’s a big challenge to be present and attentive to children.” Payne says our cultural shift to one of higher stress has negatively impacted our children – “I just believe children and parents today are stretched.”

“It’s hard to be emotionally calm in our world,” he says. “So many parents are rushing to orthodontist, to a music lesson, then the kids have to do homework and they realize they don’t have book they need or supplies they need so the parent has to go to the library or the store.”

Payne says that in these years, the parent’s job is a shepherding role, reminding children of the right decisions and giving them a chance to correct them when they make mistakes, rather than punishing them.

“Now is the time to teach emotional and social skills,” he says. “Children need to realize they are part of a team and that their actions impact on the family.”

Payne says a key word in these years is “consultation.”

He also says “this is the time to teach empathy by making children aware of the

subtle put-downs inherent in certain tones of voice or body language. Parents should also consult with children in advance of challenging situations to help them learn to make good choices without adult supervision.”

“With a 9 to 10-year-old child, their world is expanding, they’re interested in broadening horizons, so that often at this age they cross boundaries,” says Petrash. “We don’t have blind obedience from our children anymore at this stage. We have to realize they have become more independent and are obeying a different impulse.”

Petrash says when parents recognize this change in behavior, it will help them realize that a child is not willfully disobeying a request to clean her room, but may be instead too engaged in reading a book to respond.

“If we get upset, emotionally we present painful anger and hostility to our children, then we’ll feel guilty afterward,” says Petrash. “What’s needed is for a parent to calmly say that since the child didn’t comply, that there will be consequences.”

Petrash says these consequences should be measured and issued calmly, so that the child realizes that she is expected to empathize with the needs of the family and not just follow her own desires.

### ***For a teenager, what we think matters***

“In teen years, kids don’t care what we do or what we feel. But they care what we think. That’s why they argue with us, because they want to know what we think,” says Petrash. “A parent’s job description in the teen years is to engage children in a thoughtful way, how to listen, how to have communication. It’s important to know how to look for places where children talk.”

Petrash says the common frustration for parents of teens is that it’s difficult to engage them in conversation. “When they come home from school and you ask how their day was, they’ll say ‘Fine.’ And when you ask what they did they’ll say ‘Nothing’, “ so you always have to be on watch for places where the child opens up, and often that’s late at night,” he says. “And when they do open up, it’s important to always respect the child’s thinking, even though you may be arguing.

“Teens are relentless in their arguing. They’re like heavyweight fighters who will stand and body punch you. An average kid will ask for something nine times. They’ll keep asking until we cave,” he continues. “Parenting teens can wear you down and you can get discouraged.” But he says it’s important for parents to realize that it’s a teenager’s job to argue – it’s how he or she learns to think and form opinions. “It’s not a character flaw, it’s how they learn critical thinking. They’re developing abstract reasoning,” he says. “It’s how they learn to think for themselves. But it’s also now that they’re turning it on us.”

Petrash advocates using humor to break the tension of these arguments. “You want to find some way not to get so bound up in it that you push them away,” he says. He recommends parents “hit the pause button” and just stop, refusing to respond in the heat of the argument. “Try to stay emotionally calm,” he recommends. “So often I hear from parents that ‘my child just pushes my buttons.’ Often the child who is most like us, our mirror, is the one who gives us the most challenges. The child that embodies the same difficulties that I have really triggers our response.”

Payne advocates using a teen’s intellectual awareness to collaborate instead of negotiate. His motto for disciplining teens is: “Delay gratification. Anticipate hot spots. Affirm good choices.” He says it’s important that teens make choices based on “an inner sense of what is right,” rather than something that comes out of reaction, cynicism and disrespect. “Disrespect is the shadow of critical thinking. In a teenager you want to have true critical thinking, but if you have prematurely awoken this without developing compliance in the early years, then critical thinking will become disrespect, dissing, and cynicism,” says Payne.

When this happens, Payne suggests a “rescue package” of strategies designed to rebuild the foundation of compliance and social skills. When age-appropriate discipline isn’t working, he suggests backtracking to the earlier stage. “If your teenager is not showing good judgment, we shouldn’t hammer away at them for their judgments, but we should go back to what they should have learned,” he says. “Try to calibrate what a child is capable of, rather than going at them about making bad choices.”

He gives an example of a teen that wouldn’t clean his room. First there was a period of collaboration with the parents, setting an acceptable level of organization and a deadline for it to be accomplished. Then when it remained a mess, the teen was given a chance to “do it over” with a reminder of the expectations of the family to work together as a team to keep the house tidy. When it was still not done, Payne advocated “starting small, staying close, insisting and following through.” The parent stayed in the room with the teen, helping to pick up each pencil and piece of paper together to ensure compliance. “The mother decided to start small so she went into his room and said ‘let’s pick up a pencil, you take one end and I’ll take the other’, “ recalls Payne. “She stayed really close, insisted, followed through and it took half an hour to pick up the pencils.”

But soon the absurdity of the situation made the teen laugh and got him back on the right track. Payne says the parent’s resolve to solve the situation, tracing back through developmental skills if necessary, is what lead to success. “We go off-course, we have to recorrect, we go off course again. Parenting is a series of steps moving toward our goal, but along the way we make mistakes we’re ashamed of,” says Payne. “But it’s okay. We need to forgive ourselves.”

Petrash offers a baseball analogy as hope for struggling parents.

“You can get it right one out of three times and still make it to the Hall of Fame. Baseball has such a long season and a good player realizes he’s not going to win them all, but what counts is that after a bad day you bounce back,” he says. “In parenting, you’re going to make mistakes, but what counts is what you do after the bad day. You need to stand there, pay attention, and if things aren’t working, you have to change yourself.”

Payne says that parents should realize they are all on the same journey. “I hope with this conference we can give each other a real sense of community on this journey so that we really can seek each other’s advice without judgment,” he says. “The aim is to talk about how hard this is and how joyful it is.”

Payne, M.Ed, is a professor at Lesley University and a supervisor and adjunct faculty member at Antioch New England Graduate School of Education and Applied Psychology. He has been helping children, adolescents, and families through his counseling work as a parent educator and through his consulting work with schools. Mr. Payne is the author of *The Games Children Play* and is currently working on his new book, *The Soul of Discipline*. He is also conducting an extensive research project exploring and developing a drug-free approach to attention-related disorders.

An educator for three decades, Petrash has taken three classes from grade 1 to grade 8 at the Washington Waldorf School and is an author, consultant, and the founder and director of the Nova Institute. He has lectured throughout the US and Canada to promote a deeper understanding of children and parenting. He is the author of *Covering Home: Lessons on the Art of Fathering from the Game of Baseball* (2001), *Understanding Waldorf Education: Teaching from the Inside Out* (2002), and *Navigating the Terrain of Childhood: A Guidebook for Meaningful Parenting and Heartfelt Discipline.*”

The conference will be held at the Susquehanna School, 15 West Walnut Street, Marietta. An opportunity to discuss and reflect on questions and experiences will follow the presentations. Please call Lydia Sadauskas (717) 426-4506 x223 by March 7th for fee information and registration.