

The Soul of Discipline

Written by Jill Goldman-Callahan

*Last September, Counselor Kim John Payne visited our school and spoke with faculty and parents about discipline in the lives of children. A former Waldorf teacher, Mr. Payne currently teaches at Lesley University in Cambridge and is the director of the Waldorf Collaborative Counselors Program Antioch New England Graduate School in Keene, New Hampshire (www.antiochne.edu). He has worked with young trauma survivors in Cambodia, violent juvenile offenders in halfway houses, children diagnosed with emotional disorders, children who bully and those who are targeted, and the teachers who work with them every day. He also consults with parents of children like our own. He is currently completing a new book entitled, *The Soul of Discipline*, soon to be published.*

Early in a career spent working with troubled children, child and family counselor Kim Payne had a revelation. He recently had completed an assignment on the border between Thailand and Cambodia, where he was treating children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after the war. They had all the classic symptoms. They were anxious, withdrawn, and hypervigilant—and given to frequent explosions or implosions of anger. They startled at anything new. They preferred to engage in the same activities over and over, following rigidly proscribed patterns. They could not play.

Mr. Payne next worked as a child and family counselor in London. There he was amazed to find that the treatment plans he devised for these British children were the same as those he had recommended in Cambodia. Both groups of children exhibited extreme signs of stress, though it had been many years since Britain had seen a war on its own soil.

He now describes the symptoms he witnessed in London as “a cumulative stress response” to what he sees as “an undeclared war on childhood.” In many of the world’s most advanced societies, he believes, children are victims of sensory overload that is now—regrettably—considered normal.

Young children today, he said, suffer from sleep deprivation (which he defined as less than 11 hours a day), too much light in their rooms at night, too many “big-hit” foods (those that are highly sweetened or flavored), too many car trips, too many books, too many toys and videos, and too much noise. Even the echo created in cavernous modern homes with high ceilings and bare floors can have for some children a deleterious effect.

This steady diet of overstimulation puts children in what he calls an “arousal loop,” creating discipline problems and making it difficult for them to respond properly in structured situations. If your child is overstressed, a simple request to get in the car may elicit the response: “No way!”

The very qualities we admire in our children tend to warp under stress. A reliable child, for instance, may become obsessive; a busy boy, hyperactive; a dreamy girl, inattentive; a spontaneous teen, impulsive; a strong-willed boy, defiant; or an assertive girl, hostile. This phenomenon also can be seen in overburdened parents who, instead of remaining calm, overreact and thus become adrenaline suppliers for their children.

Stressful situations engage the most primitive part of the human brain, the amygdala, the part responsible for the flight-or-fight response critical to survival in emergencies. Stress hormones secreted by the amygdala override more civilized responses. When overstressed, both children and adults demonstrate a reduced capacity for empathy, a tendency to tease or to anger, a feeling of paranoia, and perhaps a sense that the future will only bring more of the same. Stressed people tend to regress to the most impoverished and unresolved part of their biographies. “When my wife tells me that I am acting like a two-year-old, I usually am,” he remarked.

Some stress is created by our physical environment. A home that is cluttered and full of intense auditory and visual distractions, for example, overwhelms the sensitive perceptions of most children. Some stress is created by overscheduling. A weekly regimen of music lessons, play dates, sports practices, religious activity, school events, and supermarket visits takes a toll on any young child.

Payne suggests balancing “big hit” activities, such as a trip to a Red Sox game, with calming experiences, such as two quiet days at home. Children who have a balance between calming and arousing activities, he said, are more likely to be emotionally resilient. Calm children can enjoy novelty, are socially engaged with others, have a good sense of humor, and can return to a state of rest between stressful events. They also have a greater capacity for reverence and for empathy, and are able to remain positive in the face of negative experiences. By increasing the number of calming activities and maintaining more predictable daily rhythms, we can alter the chemistry of our children’s brains. Payne said he has successfully treated hundreds of children diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) by putting them on sensory diets. He

is sometimes jokingly referred to as “trash bag man” because during home visits he has been known to help remove large black bags of toys, books and clutter.

Discipline Methods: The Good and the Ugly

Disciplinary methods have changed dramatically in the past 50 years, said Mr. Payne, and not always for the better. Our parents may have been raised under one disciplinary style and raised us under a completely different style, while we may be bringing up our own children under an eclectic amalgamation of several styles. In fact, the current array of disciplinary methods can produce parental paralysis in the face of rude behavior.

Obedience-focused discipline was the main method used through the early 1960s. This militaristic system demanded unstinting respect for authority and utilized punishments for consequences. Children were expected to be subservient to adults and immediate compliance was demanded through fear induction. Any disagreement was seen as talking back. At its best this system created immediate compliance; at its worst it produced submissive or rebellious behavior.

The permissive parenting movement of the early 1970s was a backlash against what had come before. Now children's anger and defiance was applauded as healthy self-expression, limits were seen as “uncool,” and saying “no” was considered damaging to a child’s self-esteem. Parents unconditionally gave way to children, expecting little in the way of chores or family obligations. Children were the center of the universe and equal to adults in terms of respect. This created a strong sense of self-awareness among this

generation of children, but also a sense of entitlement and a need for instant gratification that later manifested in addiction and relationship problems.

In the 1980s, scientific behavior management concepts became integrated into our parenting culture. This model focused on using rewards to reinforce desired behaviors. The slightly different behavior modification movement used the same concept but instead of rewards it recommended the use of negative consequences to control behavior. Both movements advocated the use of charts to show links between behaviors and consequences. These techniques effectively created compliance, but taught kids to respond to external forces rather than develop an internal sense of responsibility.

“If we bargain for compliance now, we may beg for it later,” Mr. Payne quoted from *The Twelve Keys to Discipline* by Roald Morish.. Children raised under either of these systems tend to be expert negotiators, he said. They do cost/benefit analysis on the risk/reward ratios of their actions. Unfortunately, this system sets up parents as jailers and makes interactions with children more Pavlovian than human. Children may buck the system with outrageous behaviors or wear down their parents through relentless negotiation—neither of which is a desirable outcome.

In the 1990s, the self-esteem movement floated east from California. During this decade, the slightest effort by a child became cause for a parental exclamation of “Good job!” The result of such constant liberal praise was to produce a generation of “praise junkies,” incapable of finding satisfaction in anything unless it was witnessed by a cheerleading adult. In a study conducted at the University of Toronto, kids who received lots of praise viewed generosity as a means to an end, were less kind to others, and exhibited defeatism, which reduced their level of achievement.

Quoting from the book *Self Theories* by Carol Dweck, Mr. Payne said, when approval is overused, kids learn to look smart without really learning anything and may trade their sense of play or their willingness to take risks in exchange for adult approval. He recommends replacing overly generous praise with quiet observation and simple narrative, commenting on a child's activities: "You've been drawing that truck for long time. Look at its high wheels." This type of comment lets a child know that he is noticed, without altering his own experience of the activity.

This technique is also effective in helping children make transitions. Rather than rushing children into the car or to the table, he suggests first joining them in their world, then bringing them into your world, then establishing a world together. Whipping a child's drawing off the table in mid-creation so the table can be set for dinner will only produce a furious child. But if a parent kindly notices something interesting about the picture ("That's a really neat diamond on the King's crown"), then tells the child what is cooking on the stove ("Look at this big kale from the farm"), then brings the child into this activity ("Let's see how this kale shrinks when we boil it"), the whole experience becomes one of inclusion and working together rather than rushing and pushing.

Willing, Feeling, and Thinking

According to Mr. Payne, it is important to tailor your methods to the three stages of youth, identified by Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf schooling, as Willing, Feeling, and Thinking. 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.

In the early childhood years (when the will forces are developing), we are training children to accept rules and adult direction. At this stage, the adult is the king/queen. “We’re going for compliance,” Mr. Payne said. “The key word is *limitation*.” Quoting again from Morish’s book he said the motto for these years is: *Start small. Stay close. Insist. Follow through.*

At this age, it is important for adults to model behavior they wish children to imitate. It is also important to give kids chances to “do over” harsh behaviors. This is more effective than using rewards or punishments. Early childhood is also the time to teach good manners—graciously saying thank you to the family cook and driver after every meal and car pool.

Between the ages of seven and fourteen (when the feeling life predominates), adults in a child’s life take on a shepherding role. “The key word now is *consultation*,” Mr. Payne noted. Now is the time to teach emotional and social skills, using “do-overs” as a chance to try again. If a child refuses to do something over, Mr. Payne recommends using a minor punishment that ends when the “do-over” is complete. He feels correction is more effective than punishment and reminders are more useful than threats. He 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.

During the teen years (when children begin to think independently), parents can use a teen’s intellectual awareness to collaborate instead of negotiate. If teens have empathy for others and already have learned how to make choices, they handle

adolescence more easily. Mr. Payne recommends the use of consequences during the teen years, but he prefers incentives to bribes. His motto for disciplining teens is: *Delay gratification. Anticipate hot spots. Affirm good choices.* As a parent you might say:

“When you finish your research paper, you can use the Internet.”

“What will you do if there is alcohol at the party?”

“That’s a good idea for you to call me at ten.”

He spoke of the culture of disrespect and the importance of helping youth differentiate between critical thinking and criticism. Adolescence, being the time of managing choices, it becomes important that these choices are based on an inner sense of what is right rather than a reactive, cynicism and disrespect.

When age-appropriate discipline isn’t working, Payne suggests returning to methods that worked at earlier stages. Is a teen not managing choices well? Then, go back to managing skills. Still not working? Then revert to compliance.

For example, if your teen hasn't cleaned her room for weeks, talk about room organization and make an agreement as to when she will clean the room (collaborate). If the room is still a mess after the agreed upon time, give her a reminder and a chance to “do it over” (consult and build skill). If she still doesn't respond, *start small, stay close, insist and follow through.* Sit in the room with her, if necessary, while she puts things away, pencil by pencil (compliance). Ultimately, it takes a parent really being there to guide a child.

