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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

# Limits and Latitude

## Keys to Resilience

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One of the most persistent challenges for parents is two-pronged: how to help children learn to behave and how to help them learn to cope with adversity. The wisest pediatricians and psychologists (including some who have written for this *Review*) consistently recommend discipline—that parents set consistent limits and apply reasonable consequences when children ignore or disobey these limits. They also advocate what I think of as latitude—the freedom to learn from experience, including one’s mistakes. Persuasive evidence indicates that both discipline and latitude foster many positive traits, not the least of which is resilience. Yet schools everywhere report that parents are less and less willing to rise to the challenge.

Let’s begin with discipline. Most of you reading this can probably remember that if you got in trouble at school you got in trouble at home—even if, like me, you were often right and your school was often wrong! There is no school of any kind in America that can now count on this. It still happens, but not nearly often enough for schools to expect it. Instead, there are many more instances where parents take literally what their child says about an incident at school and call to say, “I know he couldn’t have done that because he told me so.” Or where they defend a student, even when his misbehavior was significant. And there are many more instances where they ask the school for help because they can’t manage a student at home.

Just as growing numbers of parents find it hard to say “no” and then to stick to their guns, so, too, they find it hard to let their children live with the consequences of their actions (a failure to hand in the homework), and the realities of life (conflict on the playground, not making the varsity soccer team). This is understandable. We are busier and more pressed. We have less time for our kids and feel guilty about this. When we are with them we want things to go well, and we often lack the energy and patience required to endure and resolve friction. We’re also concerned about

maximizing every opportunity for them so that they're fully prepared for a future that is growing ever less predictable. We're just not confident about what is the "right" way to handle problem behavior. Finally, many parents read books that claim it is harmful to say "no" to children, or to ever make them feel bad. These parents worry that discipline or disappointment or having to accept an unfairness will cause a child to feel negatively about herself and breed insecurity.

Just the opposite is true. Helping children develop confidence, competence and resilience depends in good part on discipline and latitude. Children need limits. Not harsh or rigid limits, but clear ones, what I call "the minimum non-negotiables"—they need to know what goes and what doesn't. When children know this, their world is more secure. They grow up more solid and assured, even if there is occasional controversy at home. When children have to do some things they don't want to do and can't do some things they do want to do, they learn self-discipline. In the same way, children need the chance to learn from mistakes and errors, and even from unfairnesses that inevitably occur. All this helps them learn that they can cope with challenge and disappointment. When they never hear "no," and when every problem is quickly fixed by an adult, things may be smoother on the surface, but children don't gain the skills and confidence they will need as adults and parents.

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The point is not to have your children *like* you all the time, but to have them *be like* you when raising their own.

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Think for a moment about the most important lessons you have learned in your life. The deepest, most enduring, profound lessons. If you're like most people, the odds are very high that you learned these lessons in a context of loss or disappointment or failure, not because you won the lottery. We might wish we could have achieved the learning without the loss or disappointment or failure, but that's not how life works. What will distinguish your children is not whether these things will happen to them, but how they will respond. Their growing up can't deny them practice in these areas. The goal, after all, is not to prepare the path for the child but to prepare the child for the path.

Years ago, when I was in training, I attended a seminar that met evenings at the home of an eminent psychologist. Arriving early one June

night, I heard children shouting distantly above me, up in the third floor. After a pause I heard a bit more shouting. Then, as I reached the door, I suddenly heard the eminent psychologist's booming voice, "Because your goddam father says so, that's why!"

I was stunned. I didn't have children yet, but I imagined that, properly trained as a psychologist, you would never have to speak to offspring this way because you would always know how to get them to comply. And I knew the eminent psychologist would be embarrassed to have a rookie overhear him in a most unpsychological moment. But he appeared at the door and, with no trace of embarrassment, said, "Hi. How are you?"

It had been a hot day. His sons, aged ten and twelve, were sweaty and dirty, and he had wanted them to take baths and get into their pajamas so that they would be ready for bed when his seminar was over. He had called up to get their attention—once, twice, three times (I didn't hear this). No answer. The fourth time they had yelled back, "What." This was the first bit of shouting I had heard.

"Come down here," he told them (I didn't hear this, either).

"Why?" they yelled back. (The second bit of shouting.)

So he told them why. He wasn't enraged. His tone wasn't vicious. He was profane, to be sure, but never venomous. He was just telling them. Often, this is the only answer a parent can give: "Because I say so." During 35 years as a parent and therapist, his example has stayed with me: One of the simplest ways to say no constructively is to avoid overexplaining.

When you have explained to children three times why they must do something they don't want to do, or can't do something they do want to do, what else can you offer? Repeating yourself a fourth time is unlikely to cause them to say, "Ohhh, now I get it. Thank you for persevering. I see that you were right and I was wrong." Once you've heard your child's point of view and reclarified your own, there is not much more you can say, except, "I'm sorry I haven't convinced you, but I'm older, smarter, and it's my house, my car, and my money. When you're on your own, you can do what you want. Right now, we're doing this because your mother says so."

Just as setting limits can cause friction, giving latitude—letting children learn to cope with problems—can cause upset. Your daughter may complain that the coach is unfair and gives other kids more playing time even though they're not as good. You can take this literally, call the coach, and intervene. Or you can listen a bit and then say, "Gee, that sounds

tough. What do you think you're going to do?" If she has no idea or a bad idea, offer help. But if you leap to protect and fix, if you see every shortcoming or disappointment as a blemish on the resume instead of an opportunity for growth you'll be denying her the very kinds of experiences that build confidence and resilience.

These kinds of challenges are not just inevitable, they are useful. For young people to eventually become successful parents they need good models. There is no way to do this and keep them perpetually happy. That psychologist was a very caring father, but one who cared enough to insist when he needed to and to let his boys face difficulties when they needed to. He knew that one ultimate point of parenting is not to have your children *like* you all the time, but to have them *be like* you when they are raising their own. You certainly have a right to limit *how* your children express their dislike of you, but not to expect that they won't be disappointed or resentful. What you need to do is to *let them get glad again*.

The phrase is my mother's. Sometimes, when she just seemed impossibly rigid or when I was upset about something that someone else had done and that couldn't be fixed, she would say, "Well, you'll just have to get glad again." Instead of arguing further or trying to, she just stopped negotiating or fixing. She wasn't upset, she didn't yell. She said it matter-of-factly. Sometimes it made me furious—temporarily. I used to think to myself, "I won't! I won't get glad again." But of course I always did. Children always do. But even if they didn't, there still isn't much else a parent can say, once she has explained the reasons for her decision or sympathized with a difficulty, and repeated herself a time or two. As long as the decision is consistent, in a broad, general way, with her established practices and core values, it is unlikely to harm the children. Even if they dislike it or are unhappy for a time, they can make sense out of it. And as long as parents can remember this, they can be truer to themselves and can give their children a solid framework for becoming confident, coping adults—and eventually good parents themselves.

*Dr. Evans, a psychologist, is the Executive Director of the Human Relations Service in Wellesley, Massachusetts. A former teacher and a former child and family therapist, he has served as a consultant to more than 1,000 schools. This article is adapted from his book, Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope with the Crisis in Childrearing.*