

5 MISTAKES GENTLE PARENTS MAKE WHEN DISCIPLINING THEIR CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, chances are you've already made the decision to be a more gentle parent, especially when it comes to that big issue of "discipline". This may have been a hard decision or it may have been easy. It may be one that your family and friends support, or you may be ridiculed for it. You have the resources for it or you may be flying blind. I want to congratulate you first of all because no matter what support system you have, chances are you're still going against your cultural norms. Most industrialized countries do not support the type of gentle parenting that our children need and deserve and this can leave you feeling lost any number of times.

Our cultural expectations for children are insane. We don't have a good baseline for what is biologically normal behaviour and in turn we often judge parents for what are very typical behaviours of young kids. Sometimes the stress of other people's judgments leaves us feeling worse or that we're doing wrong and our faith in our desire to be gentle can start to wane. This becomes even harder as our children age and we think we see so many "well-behaved" children around us. When ours act out, we can only assume that it has to do with our shortcomings.

Let me start by saying that you have not failed.

Your child is probably very normal.

Your society has no freaking clue what normal looks like.

And down the line, your child will probably thank you for not falling into the pit of harsh discipline or “tough love” (a truly idiotic saying, in my opinion).

However, there are some mistakes that I see happen regularly in those who practice gentle discipline or parenting. These “mistakes” aren’t life altering, but they can make parenting a little bit harder and lead to us questioning ourselves more than we should. When we can fix these mistakes, then the job of gentle parenting becomes easier and we can better approach the situations that lead us to think we aren’t doing right. As a bonus, it can also give us the tools to tell others to get stuffed when they suggest that we’re permissive, or too gentle, with our kids.

In this brief guide, I provide five of the most common mistakes made and what you can do instead. I hope you find it helpful!

MISTAKE #1: YOU REASON TOO MUCH

This may be the single BIGGEST problem for gentle parents. Before you close this and suggest I'm crazy, please hear me out. I very much love the idea of using reason when it's appropriate, but often times we use it inappropriately with our kids and this leads to more struggles. You may have even had times when you notice that you're reasoning away and the behaviour you're worrying about just continues or escalates. This is when people start to feel that maybe they just need to be more harsh or set more limits and disregard the benefits of reasoning.

You don't have to abandon reason altogether, just recognize how to utilize it effectively and when it may actually be counter to your goals. I have identified three times when it's often used inappropriately. Part of all of the struggles has to do with our expectations of reason. When we reason with someone, we expect them to then take our perspective and accept what we are sharing with them, even if it's counter to what they want. When we remember this, hopefully some of these mistakes will be more apparent.

The first misuse is when children are too young. This just goes to expectations and we can often try to reason with very young children and that doesn't often work. If you think about the developmental capacity of an 18 month old, that's not a great space to try and reason as you would with an adult or even an

older child. Young children struggle with what we call cognitive flexibility. They find it very hard to switch mindsets so when you are trying to reason with them over something they want, they will struggle to just get to seeing things differently, even if it's something they want.

This is why parents can be baffled that kids struggle with requests that ultimately would be good for them or they would enjoy. Take the toddler who is engaged in play and loses their mind when they are told they have to get ready to go to a friend's house that they love, even when you've presented it in the most reasonable way. You can reason about all the fun they'll have and everything, but it seems to make no difference, even though you *know* once there they will be happy. This is because of that cognitive inflexibility. Neurologically speaking, to reason that we are stopping something to have fun means we need to be able to imagine that something new and that's what they struggle with.

The second misuse is when we use it long-windedly or for normal childhood events. I've seen this recommended a ton in gentle circles when there's been some kind of upsetting event. The idea is to spend this insane amount of time talking about what happened and coming to a reasonable conclusion about how to move forward. The problem here is that many kids are too young for this level of engagement and some older kids just don't have the attention span. It also tends to make natural childhood events into big deals and that doesn't need to happen.

Kids hit each other. They yell at each other. They take things, they throw things, they get mad at other kids, and so on. These are all normal events. If we turn each of these into a long-winded period of reasoning, you may face either kids who can't engage at that level for that long or kids who suddenly feel that normal events are big deals that they can't cope with. When we spend too much time reasoning, we are not letting our kids explore their

own capacity to cope with various scenarios that are normal (as long as they are safe).

The third misuse is when children are already deeply upset. We (probably) all know the times when our kids have lost it and are deeply upset about something and we start trying to reason away the distress. This almost never works and, depending on your child, can lead to even greater resistance. Why doesn't this work? There are two reasons. First is because you're adding fuel to a fire. When a child is upset, they are dysregulated and maxed out on what they can attend to. If you start talking to them - and let's face it, reasoning often involves a lot of talking - then you are actually adding more stimulation which is going to lead to feelings of even greater overwhelm. No child can attend to reason in those states.

The second reason is that you are inherently invalidating their distress. When we reason with a distressed person, the goal is to get them to see they shouldn't be distressed and while that's fine and dandy when we are in a better state, no person wants to hear that what they are feeling is somehow wrong. Yet that's the message. Every logical reason we give is a way to say, "You shouldn't feel this way". Which gets even more confusing to a child if you've just tried to validate their emotion in one way then suddenly you're invalidating it.

So what do we do instead and when is reasoning helpful?

Let's start with the fact that at any age, reason can be helpful when used to explain our reasons briefly and to the point. No long-winded explanations, but when we ask our kids to do something, we provide the reason for it. We don't overprovide it, we don't repeat it over and over because they don't like it, but we are open and transparent about what we are doing. And keep it quick. If your child does want to talk more about something, they

will let you know and that's an excellent time to reason some more, but only when they are ready for it.

When you face these situations of struggle where you're tempted to reason, I would recommend doing the following instead. First, let kids have their moments. If it's an issue between children and safety isn't a problem, then you can let them work it out. Your job - should you choose to accept - is to be there to support a distressed child emotionally and follow their lead with what they need. And when safety is an issue, let's be honest, we're not reasoning that, we jump in right away because there's no time for reason. You're not going to reason with a child who's about to run into the road. You just won't.

Second - and perhaps most importantly - leave space for the distress. If you're reasoning in a time of "tantrum" or struggle, just step back and empathize with your child. That's all they need - a safe space to experience their distress so that it can get out and they can move on. You can't reason it away, it has to be experienced away. And once that experience is gone, you've got a good time to briefly reason what's happening (if you think your child is receptive to it). Please note that a safe space is often a silent space too - don't add more noise to their dysregulation.

So often our reasoning is a reflection of our own discomfort with the child's struggle so we're trying to make it stop. When we can see our own distress here, we can hopefully work to calm ourselves down and be the support that our kids need during these struggles. When we do that, they tend to calm faster and feel more supported overall.

MISTAKE #2: ASK INSTEAD OF TELL

How many times have you been in one of the following situations or one like it?

You see your child needs a new diaper so you do the polite thing and ask your child if they are ready to change their diaper and they say “No!”

You are ready to get going and you ask your child if they are ready to leave too and they reply with, “No - I don’t want to go!”

You know it’s time for school or homework and you ask your child if they want to do it, and they say, “Not at all! Later!”

Most families I know have been here. Goodness knows I’ve found myself here many a times too. The problem here is that we are asking something that we have no intention of turning into a negotiation and the entire encounter becomes one that is rather disrespectful to the child which leads to more negative interactions not only in the moment, but going forward as well.

Take the child who doesn’t want a diaper change. If we think about this scenario from their perspective, they have been asked to come for a diaper change. The asking implies there’s an opportunity to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. So the child opts for ‘no’ because (a) diaper changes may not be fun, and (b) the child is otherwise engaged. The child also doesn’t understand the consequences of

not having the diaper changed quickly, even though it's the child who will suffer the consequences later. Once the child says no, the parent then says, "Well, it has to happen anyway" and takes the child over to do it. Clearly the child is upset, not only with the diaper change (which may be an issue as is), but also with the fact that his or her opinion was just completely disregarded.

What are the effects of this? Well, it makes the situation at the moment rather disappointing, but if it happens enough, it sets the stage for a child to feel unheard. The child's voice doesn't matter and he or she knows it. This is even more prominent for older kids when facing the issue of cleaning up or getting dressed or anything else because they are acutely aware that you just completely disregarded them.

Showing our children respect - and in turn earning some respect back - is about making sure you value the other person's input. And like all things in life, sometimes we don't get a real say, or rather the consequences are clear enough that it's not a real choice. I have to pay my taxes, regardless of my thoughts on the matter. I have to go grocery shopping when we're out of food, even if I don't feel like it.

It's not disrespectful to make this clear to children.

It's about balance.

This means that you have to be very careful about when and how you use commands to make sure they are respectful. When thinking about when we use commands, I find that there are only very few cases where you truly issue commands. The first area is when it involves safety or well-being, like diaper changes if a bad rash is imminent or running into the road. (One caveat to this is when it has to do with biological functions, even though many people view them as essential to well-being. You cannot force a child to eat or sleep or toilet in a particular manner. You can offer

up healthy food options, but forcing a child to eat will increase the risk of later control issues around food. You can offer up an environment conducive to sleep, but if a child isn't tired, they aren't sleeping. And you can offer up a toilet to sit on, but you can't have a child go if they aren't ready and sitting on the toilet till they do is counterproductive as they end up resenting the entire experience and you end up with a much larger battle on your hands. So don't make fights out of biological functions.)

The second area that they can be used is when it comes to respect for the entire family and you have family rules that everyone abides by and you know why you have them in place. And finally, you may have socially-expected commands, like "you need to go to school" or "you can't climb the table in the restaurant".

Outside of these areas, I firmly believe you have to offer your child the choice, explain the choice if they are capable of understanding, outline what you would like and why, and then allow the chips to fall as they may. You may not always get what you want, just as I'm sure you have disappointed others with your choices, but this is part of respecting your child as his or her own person and allowing them to grow and learn they are valued.

Now the keys to respectful commands are: be calm, explain, and offer choices within. Yelling, threatening, or otherwise disrespectful speech is, inherently, disrespectful. (One obvious caveat is if you need to yell a distance over a safety concern to ensure your child hears you.) There is no room for this in any respectful relationship. Being calm and telling a child what needs to happen reflects that this is just something that really does need to happen. You aren't berating them or making them feel poorly about themselves and thus the command can come across as intended – not a personal attack, but a statement of fact of something that needs to happen.

Explaining the why is quite important, especially for older children, but it helps to get in the habit with younger ones too, but remember from Mistake #1 - don't make the reason too long. Short and sweet and they will discuss further as needed. And as with most things in life, offering choices within a command often helps to show the child that you are still respecting them. The choices also give a sense of control to your child and as humans, we all want to have some agency over our actions so the more we can provide that for them, the better.

Now what if you accidentally use a request? Well, if your child accepts, breathe and move on. If they don't, I recommend accepting it for a time being then waiting to issue the command the next time. This may be as early as 5 minutes if it's something to do with well-being (like the diaper change) or may be as long as a few hours if it's not urgent. The key is to realize that you've made the mistake, not your child, and reflect on how you can be respectful to their opinion and then change your behaviour for the next time.

MISTAKE #3: THINKING YOU WILL AVOID NORMAL STAGES

I can't tell you how many times I've had families feel deep concern over the fact that they have young children who hit or bite or grab things from others because they've never modeled that, they don't punish, and they can't figure out why their child is doing something so "bad". The assumption that happens in many gentler circles is that if parents don't model these so-called bad things, kids won't do them.

Except this totally ignores normal child development, especially neurological development. Let's start by talking a bit about that neurological development because it's crucial to understanding the child's behaviour. When it comes to these more aggressive or listening-type behaviours, there are a couple elements that parents need to be aware of. The first is that what we consider "good" behaviour requires a level of inhibitory control that many children don't possess. In fact, the areas of the brain that are associated with this inhibitory control don't fully develop until for many, many years and even at age 5, it is woefully underdeveloped.

Some may be wondering why some kids seem to be able to show some skills here and the answer is that the use of inhibitory control is possible under ideal conditions. That is, when a child isn't hungry or tired or emotional, they may be able to utilize this

skill, but that becomes nearly impossible when there are external stressors. The second possibility is that you aren't seeing inhibitory control in children, but rather fear. Kids who are punished or feel intense fear of punishment can get caught in the "freeze" stage of a reaction. These kids aren't inhibiting their volitional control, but rather responding in a very high-stress manner.

The second thing about neurological development is that there is a stage where kids are highly aggressive. Not because you modeled it, but because the part of the brain that handles emotions and urges is quite active, but that inhibitory part of the brain isn't. This means that they can feel things strongly - like anger or frustration - and not be able to refrain from lashing out. And of course, this is even more pronounced when there are other stressors, like being tired or hungry.

As may not be surprising to some people, this stage of aggression tends to peak around age 2-3. I say tends to because of course there is huge inter-individual variability when it comes to these things. Like all things, some children may experience it earlier and others later. And typically, this is the age when parents start worrying about this behaviour, thinking it shouldn't show up, but yet this is exactly when we *would* expect it to arise.

Knowing that neurological development will lead to some normal behaviours, what are the ones that we can expect?

1. Kids will hit, bite, scratch, and so on. As I just mentioned, aggressive behaviours are very normal for young children and you will see it even in the most gentle homes. You don't need to punish to stop them, but continue to model the behaviours you want and offer empathy during these harder times.

2. Kids won't listen. I mean this in the sense that they may not do as you ask and also that they may not even actually listen. When kids get absorbed in an activity, they can shut off the world around them quite well and if you aren't sure that they are focused on you, they may nod or say "yes" without even realizing it. They also won't always do what you ask because they are humans who have minds of their own. Even if you reason, even if you are "right". It doesn't matter, there will be times your child has a different perspective on what to do.
3. Kids will resist certain activities. Kids go on strikes all the time. Bath strike, clothes strike, fruit strike... you name it, kids have gone through it. It doesn't mean they've had a traumatic experience associated with it or that you've done anything wrong. They just seem to have times when they want to be in control and are establishing that in the areas they feel they can.
4. Kids will yell. Being loud is kind of part and parcel of being a child. Loud when they're happy and loud when they aren't. Not all kids, of course, but the majority will go through times when they yell. A lot. At you. At others. Just yelling all the time. You don't have to have yelled at them for them to do this; in fact, it's much like the issue with aggression in terms of that neurological development.
5. Kids will say hurtful things. This will sting and many parents don't understand how a child can say "I hate you" to a parent when they've never used that language or spoken to their child that way. Kids pick up on language all around them and unless you live in a bubble (which I hope you don't), your child will use language they hear that didn't come from you. Most of the time they don't know

exactly what it means, but they know it's about being angry or upset.

Please remember that if your child is acting out, it's not because you've modeled it (though if you have, you may want to stop that). These are normal stages of child development that kids go through. And also come out of.

MISTAKE #4: FORGETTING ABOUT STRESS

One of the hardest things for parents is when our kids suddenly seem like they're regressing in terms of their behaviours. They get needier or they act out more. Things they seemed capable of suddenly are too hard. Many parents struggle with how to respond to these situations. Most gentle parents I know don't use punishment or love withdrawal (thank goodness) and so when they find themselves in a situation where nothing seems to work and their kids start acting out more and more, they can start to doubt that they're doing much of anything. It can feel like you need to do *something* to get the insanity to end.

The problem is that that "something" is often thought to be the types of consequences and punishment we've gone so long without. Is it just the age? Is there a time when these things suddenly magically work or need to be used?

The key problem is that parents forget about one big thing: Stress. Our kids do experience stress and actually it's thought that there are tons of stressful experiences in the first 5-7 years of life (yes, years) that can cause kids to have a more difficult time and need more from us adults. Because of this stress, your child may not be utilizing the tools that they were before. They may not be able to even identify their emotional state as they could before because it's all so overwhelming.

What's important here is to understand why things are so stressful for our children and what we can do to help them through this stage. Let's start with the "why" of stress because I know many families don't realize how bad it can be. Kids are thought to have a stress-free life, but the fact is that there is a ton of areas in which they will experience stress in their young lives. It starts in infancy when we see how babies respond with stress to a ton of different situations and exposures. Our job as parents is to buffer this by being supportive and helping them. However, as our kids get older, they have to go out and face a world that is uncertain and unpredictable.

This unpredictability is actually the crucial point to our children's stress. Children thrive on predictability (which is why so many people focus on routines or schedules even though both of these are distinct from predictability). They like to know what will happen in certain situations and if they don't know what to expect, they get stressed. Unfortunately for kids, there are tons and tons of new situations they encounter in the early years and this has the effect of causing more stress for them.

Dr. Bruce Perry put it poignantly when he talked about abused children. He spoke about how children who have been abused and moved into a new home that is loving and caring will - after a brief "honeymoon" - start acting out trying to get their new carers to respond negatively to them. The thought is that this goodness is so different that it's actually more stressful than the abuse they endured in the moment. (Obviously in the long-term, getting adjusted to that goodness is way, way, way more preferable, but in the moment, the abuse would actually feel less stressful.) I think that fact really drives home how much kids need that predictability.

[I will add here that there are, of course, even greater stressors that some children have to face. Low socio-economic status, racism, abuse, neglect, bullying, etc. are all huge stressors that should not be ignored. The point I am attempting to make here, though, is that even in the absence of such large stressors, children experience stress and often experience it frequently. This means we can't just see a child who doesn't have it "bad" as being one who is stress-free.]

So much of the world is new for them during this time - new schools, friends, social experiences, changes to their abilities, etc. - that it can be downright scary sometimes. This means more acting out and in ways that might feel triggering or upsetting for us adults. But it's not that they are "bad" or that gentle parenting hasn't worked. Like all of us, they are just under more pressure. When we can acknowledge all of this, we can hopefully realize that our kids aren't in need of more consequences or, worse, punishment, but rather they are being tested at a level they aren't prepared for.

If we feel we need to do anything with our kids, it's this: Connect with them, love them, and help them learn how to cope.

MISTAKE #5: FOCUSING ON BOUNDARIES INSTEAD OF SKILLS

This last mistake is something that most families make - gentle or not. Most of us live in a society that is very clear that we need to have all sorts of boundaries with our kids. These lines in the sand that they are not supposed to cross. We treat these boundaries as facts that are supposed to be self-evident.

Don't hit!

Don't snatch toys!

Don't yell!

I have yet to meet a parent who hasn't encountered any challenging behaviour with their child and the key - so we are told - is to hold firm on these boundaries and let our children know they can't violate them.

Until they do.

And then we get mad and wonder what's wrong with our children that they can't seem to grasp what seems self-evident to us. We may even offer alternatives to them in hopes that if we just tell them not to hit but to ask for help, that will make it all better. Yet it regularly fails.

The problem here is that we're focused on the wrong thing. Boundaries aren't actually all that clear. Think about hitting as an example. There are actually times we would be okay with our child hitting someone, such as if someone was trying to attack them. Even the boundary of personal space is intensely blurred for young children whose lives depend upon being intertwined with their caregivers. So boundaries themselves are a concept that just doesn't work.

I will add that figuratively I don't like it either because it suggests that there is a separation of us from our kids. When we enforce boundaries we have to have them there and this puts us on opposite sides of the wall with our kids.

This brings me to the analogy I want to share with you to better understand the problem with boundaries...

Imagine you sent a 4-year-old to school and after a week he came home with a math test. The test was advanced, but not impossible. Your child, though, fails the test. It's marked with X's on most of it and the right answers written in (without explanation), but all that is written on it is, "Don't get them wrong next time!"

Your child returns to school and you learn that math is not actually something being taught in the classroom. But despite this, the next week the teacher hands out another test, which your child fails, and again, all that is marked on it is, "Don't get them wrong!"

How would you react?

If you're like me, you'd be livid. What kind of teacher has kids in high-pressure situations and then doesn't teach them how to handle them? What kind of teacher expects behaviours that clearly haven't been taught or mastered?

Sound familiar?

This is often what happens with boundaries because all we are left with is reinforcing this random boundary, not looking at what the real cause of the struggle is, which is more often than not a lack of skills.

We all know that we need to be taught skills in order to learn them. Emotion regulation, not hitting, restraint, and so on are all skills we have to learn. We are all at different levels too and what we are teaching has to be set to the right expectations for your child and the situation they are in. Not only do we need to be taught, but we then need to practice.

If you have the expectations right then practice just helps our kids make the necessary neural connections to make these behaviours more immediate. Just like learning to drive or doing math, we start out having to put a lot of effort into them when we're mentally capable (and in times of stress we often blank), but as we practice more and more in situations that aren't stressful, the behaviours become more reflexive.

So if you find yourself thinking there's some area you need to reinforce a boundary on, I would ask that you reframe your thinking to what skill your child is missing or hasn't mastered. Once you identify that, you can make sure it's age-appropriate and get to work on teaching and practicing this skill so that when your child is next tested, they can actually have a shot at passing.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Cassels, Ph.D. (she/her) is the founder of Evolutionary Parenting, a website dedicated to both disseminating research on parenting through a multidisciplinary lens and providing assistance to families who need support with a focus on how we evolved as a species. She believes that modern discipline - even gentle discipline - still fails to account for many elements of child development and human behaviour and hopes to change that, family to family.

Tracy obtained her B.A. in Cognitive Science from the University of California, Berkeley and both her M.A. in Clinical Psychology and Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of British Columbia. She has been published in many peer-reviewed journals and has spoken at domestic and international conferences. Tracy works directly with parents and also creates online courses and workshops for both families and professionals. She is the parent to two children, one of whom is her own orchid, and bonus parent to another grown child. She lives in Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada, and acknowledges and honours that the land on which she resides and occupies is part of the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people.