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## Family Focus

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their children a great deal of freedom. Jeff and his two brothers didn't have many family meals together, limits on screens or a curfew when they were older. Jeff felt close to his parents and appreciated their leniency. (The only downside for Jeff was that his relationship with his brothers was strained. Without their parents' help resolving conflicts, not much got settled. Too often, they were left with anger and hostility towards each other.)

In order for Mandy to be able to step down from her role of enforcer, Jeff needed to agree to get involved. He knew he didn't want his two children to be as unregulated as he and his brothers were, but he also didn't want to come across as heavy-handed.

I introduced the idea of reluctant discipline to them: A parent demonstrates with words, tone of voice and body language that he really doesn't want to have to be in the position of having to discipline, but unfortunately the child's behavior has necessitated a consequence.

Too often, power struggles, resistance, resentment, and anger arise when a parent disciplines in a strong manner. A parent's loud, angry voice and irate facial expression coupled with criticisms or threats doesn't tend to produce a desirable outcome. True, a child will be corrected and disciplined, but what is the collateral damage?

We want to discipline in a manner that shows our children there are rules and ways of behaving that we expect them to follow. We need to be very clear about what we expect, and to give them a warning whenever possible before we implement a consequence. The purpose is to train them to behave in certain ways, but also for them to want to go along with our program. We want cooperation and respect.

By disciplining reluctantly, a parent shows a child that he is not taking any satisfaction in having to take charge. He is not angry, just matter-of-fact or sad because rules weren't followed. It's important to match your tone of voice (compassionate) and your facial expression (halfhearted) with your words. You want your child to perceive that you are always on his side, even though sometimes you need to insist on certain rules and behaviors.

Of course, a parent must first be able to suppress his own anger at his child's misdeeds so that he can come across sincerely and effectively. It can help to take some time to evaluate the situation and figure out how to have a measured response. You may want to talk to your partner or another trusted person. You may want to do lots of deep breathing! Avoid reacting or responding too quickly unless the situation calls for a fast correction. A toddler who continually defies parental authority or who is in possible danger needs immediate intervention. A teen who has continually ignored an agreement, such as failing to do dishes or other chores, can wait for a parental response.

As with acquiring any new skill, the more you practice reluctant discipline, the more instinctively you will be

Many parents face the difficult issue of how to coordinate their efforts to discipline their children. One parent may tend to be a strict disciplinarian, while the other may be more lenient.

Recently I met with a couple who were locked in a pattern of good cop/bad cop. "Mandy" was the strict one who set rules and applied them. "Jeff," on the other hand, preferred to be low-key and nonconfrontational with their two children. Because they weren't in agreement, their relationship with each other suffered. Mandy resented being the one who always provided the discipline, while Jeff resented the pressure to change when he was perfectly happy with the way he was.

When it comes to disciplining our children, we are often products of our own childhood family environment. Mandy grew up in a healthy family atmosphere where discipline was neither too strict nor too indulgent, what we call an authoritative approach. Her parents were in control, but the children had a voice and it was a participatory system. Family relationships were strong and respectful.

Jeff's family upbringing was more on the permissive side. His parents were hesitant to take control, and allowed

able to apply it. Since anger begets anger, removing anger from disciplining enables a child to be better able to look at his own actions instead of reacting to negative parental verbal and/or nonverbal messages.

Jeff and Mandy were relieved to find a system of discipline that felt satisfactory for each of them and also united them in a common approach. Their children benefited and felt more secure when their parents were able to work together as a team in this way.

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