

Thriving During the Elementary Years - Empowerment

By Jan Hittelman

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Providing children with a voice in their own discipline plan is a form of empowerment. As parents, our natural tendency is to assert our power or control over our children. When our children try to undermine or question our authority, we typically react forcefully to maintain our position of power. These power struggles become even more volatile when our children become teenagers. We are also very reluctant to share our authority with our children. This is often due to a fear of losing parental control. It is ironic because not sharing the power over discipline decisions, over time, eventually promotes disobedience and rebellion in teenagers.

When considering appropriate negative and positive consequences for your child, include their voice in the process. When appropriate, include some of their suggestions in your decision and work together towards improving their behavior. This is not to say that a family is a democracy. It is not. The parents are in charge and make the final decision. As a parent, however, you can still elicit your child's opinion and suggestions. This strategy results in a variety of benefits. First, empowering your child increases the likelihood of compliance. If your child has a voice in the plan, he/she is far more likely to put effort into its success. Tell your child that you're interested in his/her opinion and encourage your child to offer suggestions and ideas. Whenever possible, integrate their ideas into the discipline plan. For example instead of just imposing household chores, let them suggest or pick which chores they would prefer. If completing homework is a problem, encourage your child to help determine the best time, place, and procedures necessary to improve the situation. Secondly, the process creates more of a sense of being responsible for one's own actions. If a child has a voice in the discipline plan, there is an increased likelihood that the child will take more ownership of the behavior that is being discussed and consequently put more effort into changing it. It is also quite common that, when asked, children will impose harsher punishments on themselves than would their parents. If this sounds hard to believe, try it and see! When you're considering a punishment for your child's misdeeds, ask what they think the appropriate consequence should be. You may be surprised how punitive they are on themselves. Thus a third advantage of empowerment is that you can be perceived as a more benevolent dictator when you choose a consequence less harsh than what your child suggests! More importantly, you are nurturing your child's self-control, problem solving, and independent thinking skills. All of which are noticeably absent in aggressive, acting-out, rebellious teenagers. You need to gradually teach your child how to take increasing responsibility over managing his/her behavior, or risk a battle for control with a poorly equipped teenager. Utilizing empowerment strategies with teenagers becomes essential for effective parenting. Beginning this process at a young age will, in fact, pave the way for future success.

The excerpts above are from Dr. Hittelman's book: "Parenting Essentials: Seven Steps to Parenting Success, available at no charge on the Internet at BoulderPsychologicalServices.com.

Learn more about PEN by visiting their website at: www.parentengagementnetwork.com or by contacting Betsy Fox with the Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance at 303-441-3981.

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