



# For Parents of young children

## Consistency in Child Discipline

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

Every parent has heard that it is important to be consistent in child discipline. There are at least four aspects of this matter of consistency.

### Predictability: Consistency from Situation to Situation

Human beings have certain obvious needs—food, shelter, sex. But they have another need that is not discussed as often—the need for safety or security. The world around us, especially during our childhood years, is full of danger and uncertainty. Because of this, the body mobilizes for action. The discomfort of being “constantly ready” to defend ourselves can be relieved if we are able to predict fairly accurately what will happen next.

To a child, the adults having authority over him are a major source of threat, just as they are the main source of comfort and nurturance. If much of the adults' behavior is consistent and predictable, the child feels secure. He need not spend all his energy figuring out what Mom or Dad is going to do next. He can concentrate on other things; he is free to explore the world and to learn about it.

If his parents are unpredictable, he constantly feels anxious. Every time a rule is stated (“be home by five o'clock;” “don't hit your brother”), he must test that rule. And every time the rule is not enforced, the child's anxiety rises. This results in his not really learning what the rules or principles are. Further, he may, in time, become a master at manipulating his parents, often by doing all the things that upset them. And, this leaves the child little energy for dealing with other aspects of his world.

Of course, a parent cannot be perfectly consistent from day to day or from situa-

tion to situation. After all, the parent's feelings, the child's feelings, and the specific details of the situation vary from day to day. However, if the child is going to learn what is expected of him and what is right and wrong, the parent's expectations and responses must be relatively predictable. If the parents are to become reliable in the child's eyes, they must be consistent in dealing with a few similar situations. Then, the child can afford to abandon much of his testing and devote effort to all areas of his world.

In short, this probably means that parents should make as few demands as possible, but then follow through consistently on these demands.

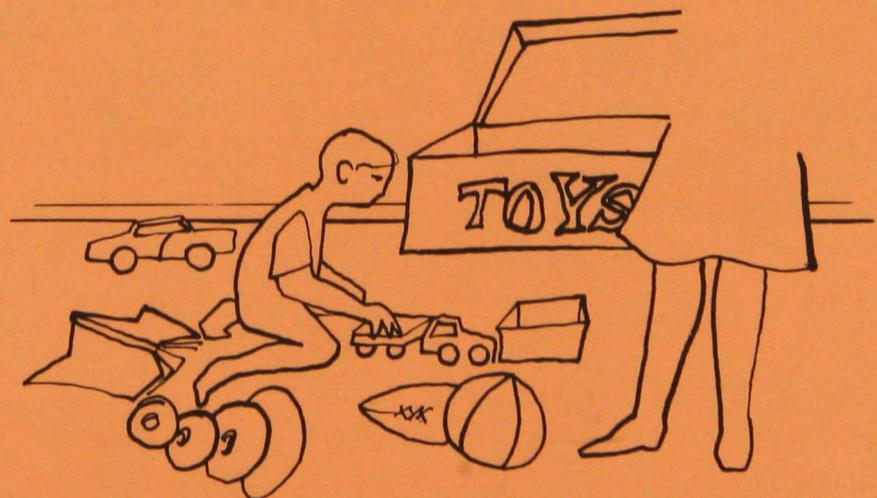
### Common Front: Consistency Between Demands of Mother and Father

Parents sometimes find themselves disagreeing with one another about how to

discipline the children, what privileges to allow them, and what it is reasonable to expect of them. It stands to reason that no two people will want to raise a child in exactly the same way. This can have advantages. A child has a good chance for a well-rounded upbringing if he is cared for by two people with different personalities and, of course, of different sexes. It is good for a child to be able to rely on both parents, each for different things and in different ways. Diversity of opinion and style at home helps prepare a youngster for the larger world where he will be expected to deal with many different kinds of people.

Parents who squabble and get into fights with each other over the children's upbringing can confuse the youngsters. As one child complained, “Mom tells me I can stay up and watch television and then Dad says she shouldn't allow it. What am I supposed to do?”

Children shouldn't have to ask that question. Disagreements about the chil-



dren are best thrashed out when the children are absent. This form of inconsistency makes the child feel just as insecure and uncertain as to what is expected of him as does unpredictability. Also, when parents disagree, children can be very skillful at playing one parent against the other. The child senses whether he can expect more leniency and softheartedness from Mother or from Father. If the parents are at odds in what they expect or demand, the child will, quite naturally, go by the easiest set of regulations.

**“Practice What You Preach”:  
Consistency Between Command  
and Example**

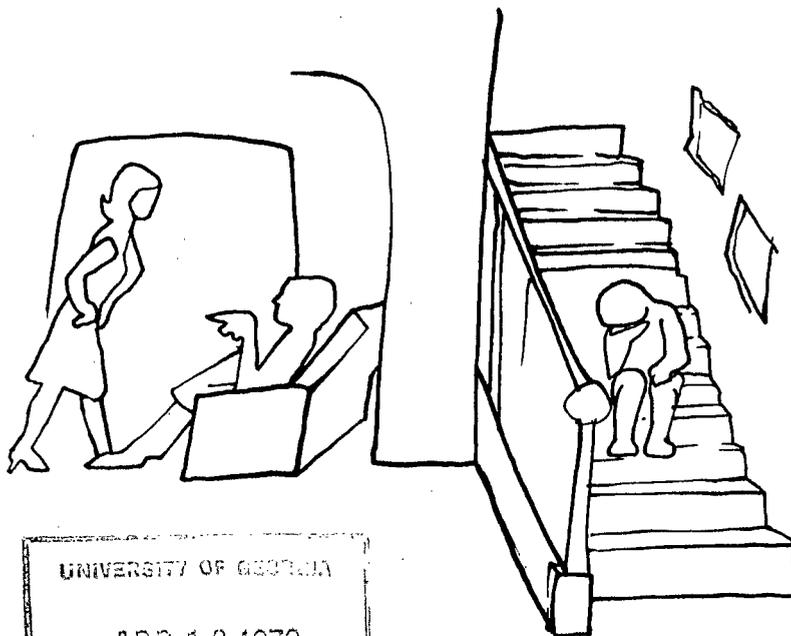
A proverb states, “Good example is half a sermon.” An old saw goes, “Children act like their parents no matter how hard the parents try to make them be good.” An editorial in a small town Oregon newspaper in 1854 concluded: “The parent who would train up a child in the way he should go, must go in the way he would train up his child.”

Values and beliefs generally are learned unwittingly and incidentally as a result of day-to-day interaction with other people. They are learned more by examples adults set than by verbal instructions. The child is a great imitator. He chooses as models those who are closest to him and who appear the most powerful and important. In teaching good behavior, it is a must for a parent to “practice what he preaches.” The mother who screams at her child in an effort to get him to be more quiet is not doing an effective job, nor is the one who spansks her child for hitting. I recall a poignant cartoon depicting a father paddling his son over his knee, shouting, “I hope this teaches you never to go around hitting someone smaller than you.”

That old and commonly used phrase, “Do as I say, not as I do” is not an effective approach in teaching kids their parents’ values. It probably is a waste of words. If there is a difference between what the child is told and what the parent is or does, the child will be more like the latter than the former.

**You Cannot NOT Communicate:  
Consistency Between Verbal and  
Nonverbal Messages**

Everything a person does in relation to another is some kind of message. You



cannot NOT communicate. The raising of an eyebrow, a frown, the bringing of flowers or a gift, the cooking of a favorite food, a handshake, a surly grumble, a slammed door, a slumped posture, an unexpected holding of the hand, a kiss, even silence or a blank look—all of these are examples of nonverbal behavior that sends a message to another person. Thus, communication occurs at several levels, often simultaneously.

Frequently, there is a conflict of messages. As the little boy said to his mother, “Your mouth says you love me, but your eyes say you don’t.” The spoken word may say one thing, but behavior, gestures, and responses may say something else. It appears that when nonverbal information contradicts verbal, nonverbal wins out. That is, the verbal (word) part of a message has considerably less effect on whether a listener feels liked or disliked than does a speaker’s facial expression or tone of voice.

Children are amazingly sensitive to the attitudes of their parents. They sense the parents’ true feelings because parents send nonverbal messages or cues that are perceived by the child, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. For example, a parent who has little con-

viction about a certain rule (perhaps one prescribed by the other parent) may not use a very emphatic tone of voice or may even accompany the verbal admonition with the trace of a smile or a twinkle in the eye.

Sometimes a parent expresses nonverbal disapproval for a behavior that he is verbally accepting. A parent whose inner attitude is one of irritation or anger cannot help but give off subtle cues—perhaps a frown, a lifted eyebrow, a particular tone of voice, a certain posture, or a tenseness of the facial muscles. Even very young children can pick up such cues.

This leaves the child confused. He is receiving “mixed messages” or contradictory cues—words that tell him one thing but also nonverbal cues that tell him the opposite. The child is in a “double bind;” he can’t obey one message without disobeying the other. What should he do? It is frustrating and uncomfortable not to know which message to believe.

While no parent can or should expect to be perfectly consistent, some level of consistency is necessary if a child is to learn the lessons of social life and to feel secure while doing so.

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