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HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME A SELF-DIRECTING, RESPONSIBLE CHOICE-MAKER WHO LEARNS FROM THEIR MISTAKES

Perhaps the first question to ask about helping your child become self-directing is this: why in the world would you do that? It is so much easier to tell them what to do and to insist on what is good for them. Also, you are so much smarter and wiser than they. Why would you entrust their lives to them rather than guide them step by step on exactly what the best choices are in each situation they experience?

Charles was a very accomplished, successful businessman, specializing in marketing financial products. He had more than enough money, had a reasonably good marriage, and was blessed with three young children whom he loved. He came to me because he was frequently irritated by his children and repeatedly had arguments with them, leaving everyone in the family on edge. As Charles and I talked more, we noticed that Charles was frequently unhappy. He was not clinically depressed. But he demonstrated a kind of grey unhappiness which permeated his life. I asked him if we could carefully study his day-to-day internal process and his regular conversations with his three children who lived with him. Here is what we found: Charlie agonized almost every day over one decision or another which he had to make. He second-guessed himself, doubted himself, and criticized himself, frequently complaining that he had “failed” to make the right decision. Even when he had made a “good” decision, he complained about the mental agony he went through ascertaining what the “right” decision was. As we examined his conflicts with his adult children, it became clear that

Charles subjected them to the same mental scrutiny he inflicted upon himself. They loved him but hated what he put them through.

What had gone wrong in Charles' life? As we studied his life more carefully, it became clear that his parents loved him but left him with a legacy that he had not yet begun to successfully outgrow. His mother made many decisions of daily life for him until he left for college, where he "inexplicably" felt unmoored, lost and somewhat depressed. His father prided himself on his own "superior logic" and constantly challenged Charles' decisions, making Charles submit to a "logical tribunal" to explain why his decision was a good one. **Charles was not granted the right and the privilege to simply and easily and spontaneously make his own decisions, learn from the consequences of his decisions, and develop the confidence that he could make mistakes, survive them, learn from them and do better the next time.**

Charles was loved. He had rules and limits. But his capacity to become a healthy self-directing choice-maker was sorely impeded by parents who either chose for him or taught him that there was only one right decision, the decision they would have made.

What do I wish Charles' parents had known? What ideas do I wish I could have taught them early in Charles' life? Here are my thoughts:

- 1. First, all children are born with an innate drive to direct themselves and explore their world in their own way**, whether their parents give permission or not. Infants pull away when they are nursing when they decide they have had enough milk. Babies drop stuff from their high chairs to see what big noises they can make, whether their parents agree to this or not. Toddlers unpack the refrigerator to see what is in it. Kids

want to run, even when we want them to walk. They want to yell in loud voices, even when we tell them it is a time to be quiet. They soon want to pick their own clothes and pick what they want to eat. Then they want to pick their own friends, their own hair style, their own music. You can like this or hate this, but it is a reality of your child and everyone's child;

2. Second, **they will do more “perfectly correct” things if you tell them what to do, but they won’t learn much about how to choose for themselves;**

3. Third, if you **use up your energy** and their tolerance trying to get them to do what you think is wise, **there is little left to help them learn from mistakes;**

4. Fourth, when you make their decisions and choices, you implicitly teach them that **making mistakes is to be avoided at all costs.** That is missing the point of child development, in my opinion. **Childhood is all about making mistakes and, hopefully, learning from these mistakes;**

5. Most importantly, **parent-directed children arrive at adulthood** having made nothing but wonderful choices, as their parents have directed, but with a diminished **capacity to make decisions** after careful thought. They do not have the privilege of making tons of mistakes, some of them painful, and then learning from those decisions. Without this they are ill-prepared for the rigors of adult life where there are lots of choices to be made. Success in careers and relationships depends upon knowing how to both choose wisely and to adapt after making choices that turn out poorly.

How do parents go about helping children become self-directing and capable of making responsible choices? How do they foster children who are both willing to make mistakes and willing to admit mistakes? What do parents do to help their children become capable of self-reflection and comfortable learning from mistakes? How does a parent support their children in developing their capacity to adapt flexibly and resiliently to mistakes and failure? What can a parent do to help their child evaluate their choices, problem-solve their mistakes and pivot to better approaches in their lives? I encourage parents to focus on the following three approaches to supporting their child in becoming a self-directing, responsible choice-maker.

Parental Self-Regulation

The first objective to be achieved when setting out to support your child's choice-making is to develop self-regulation of your own emotions. Why? Because children make all kinds of dumb decisions and mistakes which will upset a parent. If you "allow" a child to make choices and if they make unwise choices, you will feel various types of negative emotions, from anxiety to irritation to angry exasperation. You may even feel guilty for letting your child mess up. My solution is two-fold.

First, do not let a child make a decision which is beyond their capacity.

Second, do not let a child make a decision which has irreversible consequences. A ten-year-old is not equipped to know whether certain situations are safe, but they are well equipped to know whether they are hungry or not. A fourteen-year-old is not equipped to know how a tattoo they are begging for will impact them when they are 24. And tattoos are rather irreversible. But a 14-year-old teen should be able to decide whether they feel ready to sign up for the school talent show, debate team or cheerleading squad, especially since it is

highly unlikely that anything will happen that has an irreversible impact. We aim to maximize our children's learning experiences without setting them up for failure because they are in over their heads. **If the choice is within their capacities to make and has no irreversible or life-altering outcomes, let them jump into the water.** But keep an eye on them. Then help them process their experiences after making a decision. Help them learn from both their good decisions and their poor decisions.

By limiting your child's options for making those decisions that fall within their capacity and that are not irreversible, you can relax and tolerate the passing negative emotions you may have about giving your child the freedom to choose. By assuring yourself that you will help your child learn from their choice, even if it comes out poorly, you will be able to manage your own unsettled emotions of anxiety, and guilt. By watching your child learn from their mistakes, you will increasingly feel less angry when they choose and mess up, for you will know that this is just one more wonderful, relatively safe learning experience.

Forced Choice: A Method for Helping the Indecisive Child or the Oppositional Child

Some indecisive children have difficulty making a decision. Some oppositional children have difficulty tolerating being asked or told what to do. The technique of "forced choice" can help with both of these situations, though in different ways.

When your child cannot make a decision, give them a forced choice.

When a child is faced with too many choices, they tend to become immobilized and anxious. Make the choice simple, even if it is not easy for them. *"What would you like me to prepare for dinner tonight?"* might be too open-ended for some children. If this is your child, boil it down to *"Would you rather I make chicken breasts or hamburgers tonight?"*

Some children immediately resist or balk when a parent gives an instruction. With this child do not say *“Help me make dinner, now.”* Rather say *“I would like you to help me with dinner tonight. Would you prefer to help with dinner preparation or clean-up after dinner?”* Give them a forced choice. If they refuse both ends of the forced choice, give them another forced choice. *“You can help me before or after dinner or you can skip dessert as dessert is only for family members who help out. It’s your choice.”*

There are situations where you cannot give a child the freedom to say “No,” whether because it would be bad for them or because it would be bad for you. Nonetheless, you would not impatiently bark an order: *“Get in the car, now.”* You would say, *“I need to leave for the dentist now, so I would appreciate it if you would come with me now and get in the car.”* Depending upon their age, you might gently guide them towards the car or walk alongside them to your car. If your child still balks, you give them a forced choice: *“You can either choose to get in the car now and we’ll be good, or you can choose to refuse. If you choose to refuse, I will be forced to choose a consequence for you which you will not like.”*

If you know that your child is likely to have a hard time with your request, try to discuss it with them well before they and you need to act. The best time to present your request is when you are both calm. You start by framing the request and then ask for their cooperation. Use that moment to anticipate difficulties which either of you foresee and collaborative problem-solve solutions to the difficulties. *“I understand you might feel really rushed. How would it work if I woke you up ten minutes earlier?”*

Once the action is underway, I typically don’t tell the child what their consequence will be for two reasons. First, I don’t want the child to “game the system” by weighing just how stiff a consequence you are threatening. Second, because I prefer parents choose consequences when they are calm, thoughtful,

reflective and seeking to follow the “educative model” of negative consequences rather than the “I’m so offended and mad I am going to show him and throw the book at him” model. Consequently, I prefer that parents become calm and self-regulated before selecting which negative consequence to deliver. If your child pressures you to tell them what consequence you are planning for them, it is likely that they are trying to calculate whether or not they can tolerate your actions in order to remain oppositional. I recommend you simply say *“I will decide later what your consequence will be, but it won’t be something you want.”*

Guiding Your Child Through Self-Evaluation and Problem-Solving

You finally get in the habit of letting your child make decisions pertinent to their life and within their capacities. Now what? The answer is: **guide them through self-evaluation after they make decisions. Then help them figure out new options through problem-solving.** How does a parent do this?

First, give them time to notice and experience the consequences of their choice. Then help them figure out through self-evaluation these important aspects of their decision. I teach parents to think about the “ABCs” of behavior.

A: stands for Antecedents, or all of those factors which occurred before the behavior and which may have contributed to the choice of that behavior.

B: stands for the Behavior chosen by the child.

C: stands for the Consequences of that chosen behavior.

Here are the kinds of questions parents think about and find ways to weave into a conversation with their child:

1. What Antecedent factors led them to make the decision they made?

2. Did they make their choice of Behavior thoughtfully or emotionally (impulsively, fearfully or angrily)?
3. What Consequence, both short-term and long-term, did they experience as a result of their choice?
4. All in all, were the consequences a net positive or a net negative for them?

I am not recommending that you sit with your child and read these four questions to them. Children don't work that way. But if you keep these four questions in your mind, you can listen and then ask questions which will help you understand how they thought about their choice and what they learned from their choice.

Then help them move on to problem-solving so they learn how to modify the approaches they took.

If the consequences of their choice were positive, show appreciation for their good decision while helping them look at whether they might slightly modify the decision in order to get even better results in the future.

If the consequences of their choice were negative, ask them what they would do differently next time. If they don't have any ideas or if their ideas are just as bad as the original decision that didn't work out, ask them if they would like to hear some of your ideas on the matter. If they accept your offer, brainstorm your ideas with them as "options." Do NOT present your ideas as "*What you should have done in the first place.*" Do NOT present your ideas as "*You should do this next time.*" Present your ideas as "*Here are a few options you could try next time. Do any of them make sense to you.*"

By guiding your children through the process of self-evaluation and then engaging them in problem-solving in a collaborative way, you are preparing them to think about their choices and to learn from their mistakes throughout the span of their lives. You will prepare them well to be on their way towards a successful life, with well-developed relationship capacities and equally

well-developed work habits. They will not be afraid to make mistakes because they will surely know they can learn from mistakes and find a better way.

By accepting yourself, accepting your child, communicating acceptance effectively to your child, setting and enforcing consistently the rules and limits which manifest your values and by teaching your children to be responsible choice-makers who learn from their mistakes, you will be on your way as an effective parent, preparing your child to launch when they become emerging young adults.

Now that we have identified the core principles and specific skills needed to implement a Rational Discipline Approach in your home, let's turn to the application of the principles of this Rational Discipline Approach in specific circumstances and settings which commonly challenge parents. We will do this in Section Two.

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