

Chapter 4 – Discipline and Toughness

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It is said that we live in a cruel and heartless world. To send our children out into that cruel world as innocent, fluffy bunnies would be like pulling the trigger of the gun pressed against their temples ourselves. How many people sincerely believe this? That without “discipline” to teach them safe behavior and the requisite “toughness” to defend themselves, they’ll fall prey to the legions of predators that won’t hesitate to pounce on them the moment they cross the threshold. How does any caretaker ever let their child out of their sight? And even more baffling, how are there any children anywhere? What a pessimistic, nay, cynical view of the world, completely unsupported by the facts.(13) Do children need spanking- or punishment-based discipline? Do they need their caretaker to toughen them up through violence? Let’s see.

Discipline

“Discipline” is poorly used, and has been for a while. From the Latin *disciplina*, it originally meant, “instruction given, teaching, learning, knowledge.” *To guide*, in other words. At what point did it take on a violent connotation? Probably when it started being used in a military context. To be made to use the extreme amounts of violence found in war, one must be disciplined quite harshly. When defending violent parenting practices today, people say things like “But kids *need* discipline, or else [something bad happens].” A clever euphemism to hide the fact that what is being claimed is that children need to be hit, to be the recipients of violence and made to feel pain by someone far more powerful than they. But do they?

If we’re raising soldiers, people to follow our commands of death and destruction, then we likely do need to utilize harsh violence-based discipline in order to mold them into unrepentant killers. But I’m not raising killers, and I doubt you are either. Rather, I’m raising people who I hope will think and act for themselves. I, too, believe in discipline, but as it was originally used: to guide. How effective is violence at guiding children to think and act for themselves? Violence teaches that one is master of the other, and may use violence to control how the other thinks and acts. Criminals and lawmakers know this. That’s why they employ it. If our goal as caretakers is raising children to think and act for themselves, then they must be disciplined – guided – in nonviolent and noncoercive ways. Such starts with compassion(14) and respect(15), and continues with love(16), example(17), negotiation(18), and active listening.

Toughness

Honestly, I wonder what people mean when they say that kids need to learn to be tough. Do they mean that they need to be able to take an insult? Or to take a hit? Or to take a beating? This worldview that kids should be toughened up through parental aggression if they are to survive “in the real world” seems more a symptom of past abuse than of an accurate portrayal of reality. Cruelty, I think, is learned. When certain children are abused, they grow callous and resentful, and look for healing through abusing others, because it makes them feel powerful and in control.(19) Bullies are made, not born, and when they become caretakers, they perpetuate the cycle of abuse, unless they learn and commit to a better way.

If the world is, in general, cruel and heartless, then it’s because caretakers keep raising and releasing cruel and heartless people into the world. I agree with L. R. Knost who wrote, “It’s not our job to toughen our children up to face a cruel and heartless world. It’s our job to raise children who will make the world a little less cruel and heartless.”(20) It is my position that spanking and punishment does indeed “toughen up” our children, but it does so at considerable costs, as I’ve gone over in previous chapters. But I wonder, is there another way to toughen our children to stand up to bullies without sacrificing our relationship with them or their psychological development?

I think so. Much of what I wrote in my booklet, *Toward a Free Society*, presents an alternative to building toughness.(21) As was my thesis, if liberty is to be maintained, its violation must produce feelings of moral outrage in people. Moral outrage (disgust and anger) is a result of their socialization, enculturation, and education. When people are socialized and enculturated to expect liberty, they are much more likely to fight to preserve it. Likewise for peace. If we raise our children in peace, with respect, then when someone comes along – a bully – bent on treating them differently, they’ll recognize him for what he is and the accompanying moral outrage will provide the confidence and strength to stand up to him. Rather than being tough as a result of being abused, they are tough as a result of being treated with respect. That seems like an acceptable alternative to me.

I don’t think the world is always cruel and heartless. There are many good and wonderful things about it; my wife and children, for starters. I value discipline and toughness, but I see no reason to consider spanking as a necessary practice to produce them. Many have been disciplined and toughened up as a result of being raised by respectful, loving, and compassionate caretakers. I strive every day for my children to be counted among them.

(13) See “Crime Statistics” at FreeRangeKids.com at <http://skyler.link/frkcrimestats>

(14) Read “Raising Children Compassionately” by Marshall Rosenberg at <http://skyler.link/evccompassion>

(15) Read “Whence Cometh Respect?” by the author at <http://skyler.link/evcrespect>

(16) Read “Love Cups and Love Languages” by the author at <http://skyler.link/evclovecups>

(17) Read "Teaching Children Respect" by Pam Leo at <http://skyler.link/ncprespect>

(18) Read Chapter 11, "The 'No-Lose' Method for Resolving Conflicts" of *Parent Effectiveness Training* by Thomas Gordon at <http://skyler.link/petnolose>

(19) Read "Natural Born Bullies" by Robin Grille at <http://skyler.link/evcbullies>

(20) Read *Two Thousand Kisses a Day: Gentle Parenting through the Ages and Stages* by L. R. Knost, available in several formats at <http://skyler.link/amzn2000kisses>

(21) Available in several formats at <http://skyler.link/evcbook2>

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