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***Center for Early Childhood***

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Effective Discipline**

Discipline is all about instilling correct behavior and helping children care about doing the right things. Lucy Daniels Center clinicians and teachers believe that discipline involves three central parental tasks: modeling the right behavior, providing clear expectations and appropriate consequences for misbehavior, and responding to children based on an accurate understanding of the reasons for misbehavior. In this column, we will focus on understanding the third task.

**Why do children behave?:** It's easy to overlook the fact that children usually behave appropriately, even during times when it seems like they are misbehaving a great deal. Young children behave because they want to earn their parent's approval. In addition, young children behave because they are busy becoming like their parents, making their parents' limits and guidelines their own — a process that others and we call "internalization."

**Why do children misbehave?:** Children misbehave because they have very strong wants, desires, impulses, and feelings that push them toward behaviors that are not condoned by parents, teachers, etc. Let's call this diverse group of wants "problem urges." There is pleasure associated with the expression of a problem urge, whether it is throwing an asparagus, sneaking a cookie or hitting a sibling. Conversely, there is tension and discomfort associated with suppressing these urges. Children misbehave because they are drawn to pleasure and have a very limited ability to tolerate discomfort.

**It's a tough choice:** Children experience a great deal of conflict when

choosing between doing what they wish to do and doing what they know is right. If children do the right thing, they will have the pleasure of having done right, but they will have to endure the discomfort from their frustrated problem urge. If they express their problem urge, they will have the pleasure associated with gratifying this urge, but experience the discomfort associated with having disappointed their parents and themselves.

**How do children handle conflict?:** Lucy Daniels Center helps children learn to behave by believing in their goodness, always assuming that a misbehaving child also wishes to behave whether or not he or she provides evidence for such as wish. Such a faith in a child's goodness enables parents to find the positive in their child and convey their vision of their child as someone who does the right thing. Their child will feel this confidence and grow into this vision.

*Three-year-old Janie and her mother were choosing a breakfast cereal at the grocery store. Before entering the store, Janie's mother had told Janie which cereals would be acceptable choices. When the time came to choose, Janie insisted on Crunchie Wunchies, which was not one of the options. Janie fell to the floor and started screaming. Janie's mother swept Janie up and left the grocery store. In the car, Janie's mother reminded Janie that the consequence of her behavior was that she did not get to pick out any cereal. The disappointment in her mother's face and voice was another consequence. Janie's mother also added, "I am sorry that you had the tantrum. I know how bad that feels for you. You tried not to have a tantrum. You were very polite the first time that you asked for Crunchie Wunchies. Also, you found a way to not kick me."*

Janie's mother found an optimal balance between responding to Janie's misbehavior with consequences and also recognizing Janie's constructive effort. In our view, this recognition of the positive does not undermine the discipline or confuse children. Rather, it supports discipline by helping children make sense of the entire behavioral sequence that generally combines misbehavior and constructive behavior. Janie understood that her mother does not lose contact with her goodness and efforts, even when her mother is disappointed, frustrated or angry. Janie understood that her mother was an ally in her effort to grow up.

*Melinda, a 4-year-old, has the responsibility of getting herself dressed in the morning. Although she has the ability to get dressed under the watchful eye of a parent, she is unable to fully accomplish this task when her parents are not present. Without her parents, Melinda does not have the help of another person to keep the task cheerful and to help her contain her impulses. Although it will be important for her parents to set the limit of expecting Melinda to dress herself, it will also be important for Melinda's parents to recognize her first accomplishments of assuming ownership of a previously shared task. Melinda's mother can help her to notice and feel good about those actions that she did complete successfully. Perhaps her success is limited to taking just one arm out of one pajama sleeve before she gets distracted. Getting dressed is simply the compilation of hundreds of different actions. Despite how it looks, Melinda wanted to dress herself. Her parents' belief in her wish to do right is the most supportive help they can provide.*

In frustration, parents sometimes may say things like, "When are you going to learn?" and "How many times have I told you?" These statements and other similar ones undermine the goals of discipline, because they convey a lack of confidence and suggest an alternative pathway in which the child can build an identity as someone who does not learn or who does wrong.

Growing up is difficult, and parents will be able to successfully support their children to do right things and feel pride about good behavior through their understanding of their children's goodness and their impulses that get in their way.