

september-october @ symbio

upcoming presentations

Preparing for Preschool: Choosing Your Child's First School Experience

Tuesday 13 September
6:45-8:15pm

Golden Gate Mothers Group
Saint Mary's Church
1111 Gough Street
San Francisco CA
**members only event*

The combinations of development, temperament and environmental fit are important factors in determining the quality of your child's preschool experience. As parents, you will be more effective in preparing your child for success if you understand your child's temperamental preferences and vulnerabilities. Even in the Bay Area preschool roller-derby, parents still have choices – and it's easier to be effective in recognizing and making them if you understand what to look for, know which questions to ask and know how to communicate your concerns to potential preschool teachers and directors. We'll discuss these topics and have time for Q&A.

Emotionally Intelligent Discipline

Wednesday 19 October
6:45-8:15pm

@ GetzWell Pediatrics
1701 Church Street
San Francisco CA

In order for discipline to be truly effective, it has to help a child learn how to regulate and appropriately express emotions as well as control behavior. Because the goal of discipline is for a child to internalize a sense of appropriate

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When Discipline is Distressing

Q: *I had grand ideas that, if I was a loving parent and filled my child's life with lots of meaningful shared experiences, we'd have a good relationship and discipline would be pretty smooth. But that was before I met my daughter.*

Overall, we have a good relationship, but discipline is a disaster. Her zeal for testing a boundary is breath-taking. I love that she's spunky, strong-willed and intense but, at three-years-old, I feel like she's out of control. I don't really feel like I have a discipline strategy. I try to practice being positive and upbeat, using humor and empathy, being flexible and child-centered. Sometimes these techniques are helpful in getting her to agree to do what she's told. But sometimes I feel like I am the cause of terrible suffering (for both of us) because I've told her to do something as simple as brush her teeth. She's gotten me into a brilliant dilemma where I actually feel badly for protecting her from tooth decay.

"Positive discipline" has become a euphemism for me desperately trying to find a way to get her to calm down and agree to a peaceful process. Honestly, the thought of telling her do something I think she won't like fills me with utterly dreadful feelings. Sometimes I just give in and let her have her way because I can't

take the misery. I know we are down a wrong path, but I am not sure what to do. I don't know how to motivate my child or discipline her in a positive way without her getting really upset. Help.

A: You have illustrated a brilliant, and perennial, dilemma familiar to many parents, especially those who have children who are emotionally intense or need to learn by testing boundaries with vigor: how to balance the pull of your parental instincts to protect your child from suffering and your sense that you need to intentionally engage in an action (discipline) that may create distress for her in the short term.

Like most parents, your preferred way out of this dilemma is to circumvent a situation that involves you insisting on, or against, something that your daughter is conversely opposed to, or set on. When this works, it's wonderful. In those times when you, as parent, are able to wholeheartedly say "yes" to your daughter's wishes you build the bank of good feeling between you, and convey a message that her wants are important and meaningful to you. In times when you are able to facilitate your daughter's whole-hearted (or even reluctant) agreement to follow your suggestions or directives of her own accord, you are supporting a pattern of creative problem solving, collaboration and flexibility. In either case, you get to enjoy an easy outcome that feels good to you both. These are moments to celebrate and savor, but not to pursue desperately.

Children who tend to be more easy going and compliant by nature will naturally find their way into easy outcomes more frequently than children that are temperamentally more strong-willed or reactive. We use the phrase "easy outcomes," rather than "good outcomes" or even "successful outcomes" here intentionally. Kids who are strong-willed and intense by nature often have to work

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vs. inappropriate behavior and, ultimately, moral action, discipline has to be relationally relevant. We will discuss effective ways to set limits, deliver emotionally supportive guidance and foster the development of a healthy sense of self in your child in the toddler and preschool years.

*GetzWell members:
\$20/person or \$30/couple*

*non-members:
\$40/person or \$60/couple*

rsvp: reception@getzwell.com

harder to learn emotional and behavioral regulation. This requires room for trial and error; it also requires space to struggle a bit in the process of learning.

From a developmental perspective, easy outcomes are not necessarily better outcomes (although they may feel better). The difficult times are important too - they are valuable opportunities for your daughter to gain knowledge and skills that are essential to maintaining emotional well-being in the adult world. Life ensures we will all face times when our options, tasks or responsibilities will require us to move into distress or disappointment. Maintaining good overall emotional health and self-esteem during these times requires a faculty for managing emotions, maintaining perspective and making good decisions in the face of emotional discomfort. This faculty is developed through practice - ideally guided, supported practice.

You may see where this is leading: The point of positive discipline is not to develop such potent powers of persuasion that one is able to talk the most disgruntled child into loving the idea of cleaning up her toys and getting ready for bed. The goal is maintaining parental authority in an atmosphere of emotional tenderness and collaborative problem solving. But to be collaborative in a parenting context does not mean giving into your child, it means responding to her in a way that is guided by your concerns for her best interests and then helping her along a path to this end.

In the easy times, this will involve helping her to find her way to an experience of peace and enthusiasm. In more difficult times, it will mean holding a boundary, lovingly, despite her distress and giving her an opportunity to learn how to manage distress. In interactions when you and your daughter are at cross purposes, it requires choosing a moment when you stop trying convince her to join you in your position, allow her to maintain her own wishes, and use your authority, rather than persuasion, to move her forward down the most helpful path. You must set a boundary and hold it.

Your daughter's experience of her own power will not feel safe to her if she feels as though the exercise of her full personal will could cause a breakdown in the structure around her. Likewise, if you believe that every time your daughter is frustrated by a boundary or a directive you must convince her to embrace it joyfully, you run the risk of teaching her that she must find a way to feel happy about the tasks or limits confronting her before she engages this. If you do that, you set her up with an impossible job.

The ability and permission to proceed ahead with what must be done despite disappointment or discomfort is essential for functional living and emotional well-being. Imagine being required to feel full of enthusiasm for sorting tax receipts or doing dishes before you could begin. Most of us would be unsuccessful at attempts to summon genuine enthusiasm and would have to confront feelings of confusion, failure and frustration; and there's a good chance that taxes and dishes would remain undone.

So, help your daughter to a positive experience when you can. But when you can see that her resistance, frustration or disappointment over your instruction are deep and persistent, give her the gift of simple boundaries for behavior, with the option to dislike the experience. If you can accept that she is upset by your directive, but expect her to do it anyway, she will have a model to learn from and slowly internalize.

Keep in mind that, in order for this exercise to be valuable, your daughter's distress at the boundaries you impose must not be eclipsed by the distress in the relationship between you over the event of imposing it. If she is upset, even very upset (as is her prerogative to be as a novice at emotional regulation) and you are able to accept her distress with a feeling of firm compassion, the distress she feels does not become distress between the two of you. But if your boundary setting leads to an argument over how she is going to feel about the boundary, or if you are noticeably upset with her for being upset, the energy in the interaction shifts from the problem of emotional

regulation to distress over what's happening in one of the most important relationships in her life. When that happens, the lesson on managing frustration will be lost and your interaction will drain the resource pool of security that she needs to draw on in order to learn it. This is why your ability to tolerate and accept your daughter's distress is key to her learning how to do the same for herself.

Of course, gaining and summoning such acceptance is no simple task. It requires persistence, creativity and patience with your own process. You may think of your daughter's brilliant dilemma as an invitation to a parallel experience: The utterly dreadful feelings that you experience when you know you will have to set a boundary are an adult version of the utter disappointment your daughter experiences upon realizing she may not get her way.

Right now, you are both stuck in despair when these circumstances arise. But, as you spend less energy trying desperately to get the easy outcome every time, you will have more energy available for managing the emotional adjure of the difficult times. Once you make that crucial shift, you will be more able to help your daughter do so as well. You may come to find that this process is also a meaningful shared endeavor. While it lacks the lightness of an easy outcome, it offers the intimacy of a shared knowledge of grace in the face of discomfort.



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