

Discipline the Waldorf Way

There's a myth about Waldorf Education and discipline. I've read some comments saying Waldorf children are not disciplined and are allowed to do what they want. My experience has been the opposite. Here's what I learned:

1. Little children learn by imitation — If you have little kids, you will see this. So, as parents we have to be worthy of their imitation. If we want them to be calm, that's what we need to be. Pretending doesn't help. Kids are sense beings and they know (often even better than you) what's really going on inside you. If you're trying to show calm but your thoughts are jumping from one subject to the next and you're not all there, they will show you that they know it. One of the toughest things about being a parent is that your children will show you who you are. We have to be prepared to always look within first when a behavioral issue shows up in our kids. It's easy to blame external factors, but it will hardly ever produce results. Oh, and yelling at them to calm down will teach them a few things, but not how to calm down.

2. Actions are effective, words not — Small children don't respond well to words, words, words. But we can very effectively steer them away from potentially explosive situations through action. Early Childhood Waldorf teachers are experts at this. They will take a hyperactive child by the hand, give them some beeswax or thread to work with, all the while just humming and working. No words, just actions. Or they will hold them by the shoulders and sit behind them when they're disruptive during a story. Sometimes all a child needs is an adult's full presence and they will know to settle down. Constantly moralizing and explaining right conduct, telling the children "No", will only teach them to do the same to you. Silent, swift and calm action does wonders, though.

When I was new to conscious parenting, I witnessed this magic through a fellow Waldorf mom. We were all in her living room when two little kids had somehow gotten hold of sticks and were starting not only a "swordfight", but becoming more and more out of body and hysterical. This mother was in the middle of a sentence but she got up, confiscated the sticks calmly and said thank you to the children. She did it so quickly and calmly that it took them a few seconds to figure out they'd been taken. She put the sticks on top of a cabinet and brought them to a table where there were paper and crayons. I was amazed at how swiftly that was done. What struck me the most was that because she was calm, the kids followed suit. She did it without words. She didn't say, "stop" or explain why she took them. She just did it and she offered an alternative. It was a profound and useful lesson. Show them. Don't tell them.

3. Consistency and follow through are your weapons — If you tell your kids to put away stuff and then let them get away with not doing it, you're setting yourself up for problems. To me, this is where integrity begins. If you have a policy about no sugar

then give in to sugary treats when you're tired and think it's going to buy you precious alone time, it's going to bite you back so badly. Your children will only learn to tire you out to get what they want. Teach your children that your word is gold and that their word should be the same, by walking your talk. If you say it, do it. Consistently. If you can't follow through or couldn't care less anyway, just don't say it. Children know when you mean business. If you want them to value your word and to be the kind of adults who will speak the truth, follow through.

4. **Rhythm is the foundation of discipline — children thrive when there is a sound rhythm at home. Rhythm doesn't mean rigidity, but it means that an ebb and flow is followed. Meals should be more or less at the same time each day, as well as bathing, outdoor or indoor play. Sleep time is also sacred time. Children become out of sorts when they are hungry and sleepy. Make sure you respect that and your days will go more smoothly. This is key, especially if you have to travel with your little ones. Replicating this rhythm is like bringing home with you wherever you go.**

5. **Change will always bring upheaval — before you bring change into the children's life, think it through. How necessary is that trip, playgroup or worse, outing to a mall? Most of us think kids can be dragged anywhere because they're just so resilient, but you will see in their behavior that it can be disruptive for them and counterproductive for you. Again, children are sense beings and if they are over stimulated, you will feel it. When it comes to little kids, prevention is everything. It's hard to pull them out of a tantrum. It's easier to create the space and environment that brings calm, rather than do damage control later.**

Some parents also project their own desires on their kids and then use that to blame a situation they put themselves into, "Oh I took him to the mall because he had cabin fever, and then he was in such a bad mood I couldn't put him to sleep." A short, quiet walk would be more helpful than a trip to the mall. And who had cabin fever? Children will always be content wherever their parents are. That's really all they need, especially when they're very little. Be honest and clear. Is it really your child you're doing it for? There is definitely a connection between a mother's well-being and that of her child. It's direct and shared, so if you feel cooped up then by all means take your child for a short walk. Or maybe to the park. Or out in the garden. But try to choose an environment that will be peaceful, rather than one that is overstimulating, like a shopping mall. Parenthood entails giving up a lot of things, but knowing why you're giving them up makes it easy. I don't mean foregoing self-care, but I do mean simplifying to essentials. For that, we all need to be much more honest with ourselves.

6. **Resolve — if you feel in your heart that you are doing what you think is best for your child, then you won't budge. But if you're unsure of what you're doing or simply mimicking something you saw that doesn't really make sense to you, give it up. If you keep denying your child soda, but don't really see what the big deal is and then give in, deny, give in, what's the point? Be inwardly clear about what's important to you**

and stick to it. You have to know why you're doing things to be able to do them effectively. If you have resolve, you won't waver. If you're clear and strong inside, your child will feel it and nothing more needs to be said.

7. You are the authority, not them. Don't fool yourself into thinking you had to give into your child because you were powerless and he wanted something so badly. You are the adult here, not them. You know better. They are children. When my kids were little and a yaya would say to me she let them have something I precisely told her they couldn't have because they were forceful, her days were numbered. I knew she did not have the ego children need to have around them. You know what's best for them so don't blame them if you give in. You are the authority after all.

8. Love takes the long view. When you are fully aware that you are raising your children to be fine adults long after you're gone, it gives you perspective. You know that the things you do today inform and shape the kind of adult your child will become. That always helped me make decisions. Thank God I'm not the type to care what people say, as people did say things about the way I raised my little ones. Well today, I have received some unsolicited praise about how I must have done something right by them and I'm glad I went full force with my convictions, even if it meant going against the grain.

Love is making the difficult decisions, and most often the unpopular ones. If you're big on being liked, this won't be easy (but raising a child is not meant to be). Parenting is personal. Do not let other people's opinions pressure you into doing something you don't believe in. Pressure comes when you feel unsure of yourself, or if you want to impress others. Who has the time for that? Focus on your children and what you know in your heart you want for them and then follow through. Love is not fluff; it is hard work. Your children are born to you not so you can please them 24/7, but so that you can provide the boundaries they need to grow into healthy, balanced adults.

Finally, no parent is ever perfect. We've raised our voices, lost it, raged when we swore we never would. **Everyone has been horrible (or thought himself horrible) to their children. Every mother has painful memories of times she was less than she should have been, but I was also taught that as long as we strive to do better by them and in our own inner work, the children will feel that as well. They will feel us striving with all our might to be better. That is the gift of being human. It is not to excuse our bad behavior, but to help us pick ourselves up, look at ourselves honestly and create room for improvement.**