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Raising Kids Without Bribes

The Secret to Winning Their Cooperation

There's one type of statement that I try to avoid when I'm talking with my kids.

"If... then" statements.

You know the ones I mean.

If you do all your homework, then you can use social media or game.

If you do all your chores, then you can have your allowance.

If you go to bed on time, then you can go out on the weekend.

The problem with these statements is that they're essentially bribery. And bribery is just a threat in disguise. You might as well say "If you don't do all your homework, then you can't use your devices."

Bribery, rewards, and punishment are an effective parenting tool... if your only goal is to secure immediate compliance. That is, if you want your child to do what you say when you say it. Which probably sounds like exactly what you want.

However, when you think about it, immediate compliance probably isn't the real goal. What you really want for your child is moral internalisation. That is, you want your child to understand the rules and the reasoning behind them to the extent that they will do what is right even when adults aren't around to tell them what to do. Sounds better, right?

Moral internalisation requires a completely different set of tools. We can't rely on bribery, rewards, and punishments if we're aiming for **moral internalisation**.

However, moving away from the tool of "If... then..." statements isn't easy. This form of fear-based discipline is automatic for so many parents because it's such a simple formula to follow. It doesn't require much effort. But if you're ready to expand your parenting toolbox, here's a few tools you can try:

Do it with them.

You know they have a test to study for, but instead of yelling out "If you don't start studying now, I'll take your phone away", try pulling out your own laptop or book and invite them to study at the dining table with you. Our kids want to be involved in our world, even if they're at the age that they don't want to admit it. So, if we're doing something, and we invite them to join in, chances are that they'll say yes, even for something as simple as sitting together to study.

Trust them to do things when ready.

This one can feel like it would never work. Yet if you can step back and trust the process, you might be pleasantly surprised. All you have to do is say “Can you set the table when you’re ready?”, and then let them be. They may need a gentle reminder, but if we step back and let them know that we trust them to get the job done in their own time, there’s a good chance they’ll do it.

Collaborate to find win/win solutions.

When we talk with our kids and value their input, we can often find compromises that work for everyone. That might go like this: “I really would like you get enough sleep during the week. How can we make sure that you’re getting to bed at a good time?”

Explain the reason for a rule.

When you let your child know why you would like them to behave a certain way, and set up expectations in advance, they’re much more empowered to behave the way you would like them to. By explaining to them, for example, why you would like them to put their phone in another room while they’re studying, you’re helping them to take ownership of the situation. It can also be a good idea to plan contingencies in advance for if expectations aren’t being met. For example, “if you’re having a hard time putting your phone away while getting your homework done, we could try putting it in a safe as soon as you get home from school.”

Explain natural consequences.

This is the one time I use if... then... statements. It might look like this: “If you watch TV before doing your homework, then you might not leave yourself enough time to get everything done. What do you think about that?” By asking for their input, you’re asking them to consider what they can do to avoid the natural outcome of certain behaviours. In this case, they might decide to watch for just 30 minutes to unwind from school before tackling their homework.

Getting out of the habit of using bribery to control our kids isn’t easy. It requires trusting that internalising morals is better, which is hard when we’ve been conditioned to believe that good children are compliant children. It requires expanding your toolbox. It requires admitting that not every tool will work in every situation. It requires patiently acknowledging that sometimes you won’t be able to secure compliance.

However, turning to connection and away from coercion is so much better, both for our children and also for our relationship with them. If you’re ready to give it a go, pick a tool, try it out, and see what happens.



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