

## Parenting

# No timeouts, reward charts or taking their toys away. So how do we get our kids to behave?

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As most of us have taken spanking and other forms of corporal punishment out of our parenting tool box, time outs have become the go-to for parents struggling to manage unruly behaviour.

But, says the author of a new book on what brain science tells us about how to discipline our children, even that trusted approach can have a negative impact on a child's development.

Vancouver-based registered psychologist Dr. Vanessa Lapointe, whose book *Discipline without Damage* was recently released, argues the science of child neurodevelopment tells us interventions should "reinforce connection, not separation" between a child and a parent.

"The traditional approach to discipline that understands challenging behaviour as something that must be stopped, no matter what, simply does not work," she writes.

If even time outs are verboten, what's a parent to do? We spoke with Lapointe about a science-based approach to discipline.

### **Why doesn't spanking apply in today's world?**

When we know better, we have to do better. We know that parenting through fear and emotional and social isolation is not aligned with what contemporary science tells us is good for kids.

### **So what does contemporary science tell us?**

We try to press upon children realities of the adult world, the idea that we want them to be in control of themselves. The reality is, kids don't have self-control because their

frontal and prefrontal cortex are immature. We know that the brain develops from the bottom up, meaning that the core or the foundation of the brain is the first circuitry that really takes root, and the rest of the brain will layer up on that foundation.

Now down in that foundation, we find a lot of the neural circuitry related to emotion and, in turn, emotional control. And there has been a lot of research looking specifically at what causes that part of the brain, or the systems associated with it, to flare up and become dysregulated, and what would then conversely allow those parts of the brain to be settled and calm.

When children are stressed through any kind of relational disconnection – which would include discipline tactics that are based on fear or discipline tactics based on emotional or social isolation – that causes a dysregulation in the brain. When people think, “I’m gonna teach them a lesson and I’m gonna make sure they know,” well, you can bang your head against the wall all you want in trying to teach that lesson, but the reality is if the brain isn’t ready for it, it’s just not gonna happen.

**You say discipline is not about making a behaviour stop and go away. What is it then?**

In reality, discipline is about connecting with your children in their time of need. We provide that support through our connection with them, that calms and steadies and regulates them – and then we give some teaching about what we hope will be able to change about that reaction the next time around. Not that we expect [that it] actually will change!

But as development happens and their capacity for self-control increases, and our relationship with them is intact, they’ll desire to want to do our bidding. Neuroplasticity [the brain’s ability to change throughout life] reinforces connections that allow that kind of regulated brain to become a more permanent thing. So eventually the child’s capacity for self-regulation and control increases.

**Many parents use time outs, consequences, reward charts and removal of privileges as an alternative to spanking, but you’ve said these strategies can negatively affect child development.**

[These approaches] respond with something that either creates fear in them or isolates them. Because they’re so desperate to have the connection restored, they will cease the behaviour. But it’s a façade of control. Internally they’re still quite unsettled and dysregulated. In the longer term, that can actually leave your child more prone to things like anxiety, depression and attention challenges.

**What is the basic premise of your discipline strategy?**

A. We know indisputably now that we require connections with one another in order to thrive. And children actually need it to be healthy and to grow. A lot of the common

tactics that people use involve disconnection. So we need to take that premise of connection and relationship as being a key component to healthy child development and make sure that we are infusing everything that we know about discipline with this idea of connection. When we do that, we grow brains that are really good at regulating.

### **So no spanking, no time outs. What should parents do?**

In my book I offer nine concrete steps to effective responding in the moment. The bottom line is that effective discipline is much less about what you do and much more about how you are.

*This interview has been edited and condensed by Dr. Joelene Huber, a staff pediatrician at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, an assistant professor in the University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine and a Fellow in Global Journalism at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto.*

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### **Parenting tips from *Discipline without Damage***

**1. The tip:** Be firm but kind.

**In real life:** “No, you can’t go over to Melissa’s house [cue child’s resistance flaring up]. I know you are disappointed. I think if I were you I would feel the exact same way.”

**2. The tip:** Understand misbehaviour as a child who is struggling.

**In real life:** “Oh my goodness – you are having a terrible time – come with me. I will help you sort this out. Let’s grab you a drink of water and we can problem solve together.”

**3. The tip:** Focus on the relationship as a core element of your approach to discipline.

**In real life:** “Wow – look at your amazing Lego creation – you are a rock star Lego builder. I love how you mixed all of those colours in. Now listen, I need you upstairs in three minutes to wash your hands and be at the table for dinner.”

*Joelene Huber*