

FAY PERSPECTIVES

Evidence-informed guidance for healthier relationships, emotional well-being, and resilient living.

PARENTING SERIES

P-02

When “1-2-3” Isn’t Enough

Looking Beneath the Behavior

Consistent discipline helps children learn appropriate behavior. But effective parenting also involves understanding **why** a behavior is happening.

Every behavior communicates something.

Sometimes a child is making a poor choice.

Other times, a child is struggling with emotion, a developmental challenge, or a nervous system that feels overwhelmed.

The goal is to respond to **both** the behavior **and** the underlying need.

Ask Yourself:

Instead of asking, “**What’s wrong with my child?**”

Try asking, “**What might my child be communicating?**”

Children often lack the words to express:

- frustration
- disappointment
- fear
- embarrassment
- loneliness
- anxiety
- fatigue
- jealousy
- overstimulation

Their behavior may become their language.

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The Three Questions

When difficult behavior occurs, consider:

1. Is this a discipline issue?

Has my child made a choice that requires a clear limit?

Examples:

- refusing instructions
 - hitting a sibling
 - disrespectful behavior
 - breaking family rules
- ✓ **If yes**, calm and consistent consequences are appropriate.

2. Is this a developmental issue?

Is my expectation realistic for my child's age?

Young children are still learning:

- emotional regulation
- impulse control
- waiting
- sharing
- flexibility
- frustration tolerance

Sometimes children need **teaching** more than consequences.

3. Is this an emotional issue?

Could my child be overwhelmed?

Children often struggle after:

- poor sleep
- illness
- changes in routine
- family conflict
- school stress
- friendship problems
- grief or loss
- sensory overload

When emotions run high, children first need help becoming calm before they can learn from correction.

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Remember the Brain

When children become overwhelmed, the thinking part of the brain becomes less available.

You may notice:

- yelling
- crying
- shutting down
- impulsive behavior
- inability to listen
- difficulty solving problems

During these moments, connection often needs to come before correction.

Connection Before Correction

Connecting does **not** mean giving in.

It means helping your child feel understood while still holding the boundary.

Examples:

"I can see you're really upset."

"I know this is disappointing."

"It's okay to feel angry."

"I'm here with you."

Then...

"The answer is still no."

Or...

"We still need to follow the rule."

Children learn that all feelings are welcome—even when not all behaviors are.

Think of Discipline as Teaching

Healthy discipline asks: **What skill does my child need to learn?**

Perhaps they need help with:

- calming their body
- asking for help
- handling disappointment
- waiting patiently
- solving problems
- repairing relationships
- expressing feelings respectfully

Behavior improves as these skills develop.

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After Everyone Is Calm

The most meaningful teaching usually happens **after** emotions have settled.

This is the time to ask:

"What happened?"

"What were you feeling?"

"What could you try next time?"

"How can we make this right?"

Touchpoint:

Children remember calm conversations much better than heated lectures.



Parenting Is Progress, Not Perfection

No parent responds perfectly every time. When you lose your patience:

- apologize if needed,
- reconnect,
- repair the relationship,
- and begin again.

One difficult moment does not define your relationship with your child.
What matters most is the pattern of love, consistency, and repair over time.

A Balanced Approach - Children grow best when they experience both:

Clear Boundaries

- predictable expectations
- consistent follow-through
- accountability

Warm Connection

- empathy
- encouragement
- emotional safety
- unconditional love

Together, these create the foundation for resilience, responsibility, and healthy relationships.

Remember:

- ✓ **Calm limits teach behavior.**
- ✓ **Warm relationships teach character.**
- ✓ **Children need both.**

Every behavior tells a story. Curiosity often opens doors that correction alone cannot.

— Siobhan Fay