

# No-Drama Discipline Summary

By Daniel Siegel

Have you ever experienced your child having a meltdown in a toy store because you refused them a toy? Or have you ever been an onlooker, witnessing a child lying prostrate on the floor and screaming over not being given an ice-cream? In scenarios such as these, you've likely had a range of reactions. Perhaps you've felt embarrassed, annoyed, judgemental, pitying, or even furious? You may feel as if the parents are at fault for not disciplining their child correctly, or that you yourself are a terrible parent. Or, you may think that the child needs more discipline, or clearly hasn't been disciplined enough. Older generations may scoff about a "jolly good hiding," or a "firmer hand," while others may advocate for a "time out."

*No-Drama Discipline*, co-authored by Daniel Siegel and Tina Bryson, provides a workable guide to re-thinking our perceptions of discipline. The interdisciplinary "whole-brain" approach, combines science and everyday examples, to practically provide parents and caregivers the tools to address conflict within adult-child relationships.

Discipline is one of the most challenging aspects of parenting, and numerous books have been written on how to do it right. What we often forget is that children have different neurological processes. Furthermore, how we react to these differences has a significant impact on a child's emotional development. Dan Siegel is a Professor of psychiatry at UCLA, and has vast experience working with children and early childhood development. Tina Payne Bryson has a Ph.D., and has written several books on attachment science, child-rearing, and interpersonal neurobiology.

This brief summary of *No-Drama Discipline*, delves into the importance of compassion and empathy, when dealing with children and their emotions. What's more, it gives us the tools to avoid unpleasant scenes, embarrassing tantrums, and feelings of exasperation. The book provides a model that considers cognitive development to set realistic expectations for dealing with conflict resolution. Emotions are varied, and children do not experience the world in the same way that adults do. Hence, this book provides a discipline model that embraces respect, empathy, and growth. *No-Drama Discipline* isn't a quick fix, it involves constant engagement with one's child. The idea is that it is about putting in the work early on, to instill good behavior patterns from both parties.

## **What Is Discipline?**

What comes to mind when you think about discipline, and the discipline that you received growing up?

For many of us, discipline could involve feelings of shame, anxiety, and even fear. Many of us may have been raised with the idea that discipline would result in very unpleasant consequences, or was something that we

were threatened with. When discipline is focused on punishment and consequences, most of us likely don't focus on our own behavior, but on the behavior of those disciplining us. Hence, most children who are punished focus on feelings of resentment, rather than on their behavior, and the lessons they could learn.

The key message in *No-Drama Discipline*, is that we need to adjust our attitudes towards understanding discipline and disciplinary practices. Discipline shouldn't be forceful and aggressive, or something that we don't like doing. The suggestion is that we view discipline as instructive rather than combative. Discipline isn't about shouting or reprimanding, but rather about listening, and then providing clear and concise instructions.

So discipline isn't about punishment, it's about teaching. Adopting this attitude shift will make a significant impact on how we parent. And discipline shouldn't just be seen as a repetitive act, but something that's continually being adjusted according to the circumstance we're in. The authors view these as a series of teaching moments, rather than one blanket form of discipline covering all eventualities.

Furthermore, relating to children can often be complicated, and this book provides tools to help connect with our children. How do we reach out to our child, or engage with them so that we don't have to resort to shouting and losing our temper? The secret is to reach out, redirect emotions, and provide a clear opportunity for growth. This makes problem-solving the core focus, and changes the outcome to a win-win situation. But, as with everything, we need to be proactive about discipline, and we can't drop our guard and revert to old habits.

So, in short, discipline is about teaching, and teaching is about

developing skills. The idea here is that given enough time, and enough of the tools, our children will be able to self-monitor, self-reflect, and in turn, self-discipline themselves. As we know, all children are different, and a child's brain has a considerable impact on their behavior and how they react to situations.

## **Inside a Child's Brain**

You may have heard of the portmanteau "hangry." It's the feeling of anger and frustration that we get because we're hungry. This experience is even more acute for a child because they haven't developed the skills needed to process these feelings and emotions. As with every other organ in the body, the brain needs time to grow and mature.

As parents and caregivers, we need to understand that every stage of childhood development is different, and therefore you can't have a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline. There are numerous ways to approach the various stages of a child's emotional development, to find the best way to relate to them. Understanding how children think and behave, also allows us to tailor a specific type of discipline, and communicate with them in a calm, constructive, and loving way.

The more you engage with your child, and develop teachable moments, the more they will develop. So let's first look at what's described as the upstairs and downstairs brain.

When a child is born, their downstairs brain is already relatively well developed. The downstairs brain controls basic human functions such as breathing, blinking, and yawning. On the other hand the upstairs brain, or cerebral cortex, is underdeveloped during childhood. It takes years to

develop the upstairs brain, and functions such as empathy, understanding, rationalization, and so on, are in a state of constant development. Furthermore, our brains are context-specific, and all of our life events have a significant impact on how we perceive the world around us. Our brains are in a constant state of flux, and continue to develop throughout our lives. Therefore we need to understand that children often don't have the skills to navigate ideas around behavior and consequence.

What's more is that the brain is either in a reactive or receptive state. It's almost impossible to relate to someone when they're reactive, so the strategy is to help them to get into a receptive state. So what are the strategies to optimize teachable moments when it comes to discipline?

## **Strategies to Develop Our Discipline Approach**

Traditional discipline is counterproductive because it's not conducive to teaching or learning. Furthermore, children need to be in the right frame of mind to learn, because you can't discipline until you can foster a good learning environment. The approach here is to get your child from feeling reactive, to receptive.

To put this in perspective, take the typical scenario of someone complaining in a restaurant. Whether they're behaving in a volatile manner, or just monologuing about their poor experience, they're acting reactively. In a situation such as this, you'll probably notice the manager nodding his head, or just looking a bit shell-shocked by the outburst. In any event, no resolution will be achieved until the person complaining has moved over to a receptive state. The manager needs to connect with the diner, and figure out the root of their complaint to do this. The same thing applies to children when they're upset or flustered.

Therefore, at the heart of being able to discipline a child, is developing a range of skills to cope with certain behaviors. Focusing on these skills lets us hone in on our own strengths and weaknesses, and get to grips with the best way to communicate with our children. By doing this, both child and parent will learn valuable lessons about communication and effective outcomes.

Traditionally the outcome of discipline was that it was based around consequences and punishment. We've all been told there are consequences to our actions. The problem with this is that most of us aren't actually given a lesson about this, until we do something that has consequences. The key message is that we should focus a lot more on learning and lessons, as opposed to the more hard-line approach, of telling children that there will be disastrous and unpleasant consequences.

The first strategy of discipline is the idea of connection. Connection is all about empathy, validation and understanding. To form connection, keep in mind the 4 S's. These are, safe, secure, seen, and soothed.

Let's take the example of Nick and Adam. Nick excluded his brother Adam from a game with his friends. As a result, Adam drew on Nick's favorite toy. A parent may be tempted to shout at Adam, and tell him off for his bad behavior. However, this wouldn't address the root cause of the issue. The idea is to engage with Adam's upstairs brain, by trying to get him to explain why he drew on Nick's toy. By applying the 4 S's, a parent may begin by kneeling down on Adam's level and looking him straight in the eye, and telling him that everything's okay. By doing this, Adam will feel safe and secure. The next step might be to acknowledge Adam's feelings, and ask him to explain why he acted the way he did. Was he feeling angry, frustrated, excluded, or a mixture of all of these feelings? And finally, once Adam has been able to express his feelings, you'll be able to soothe him, and connect with him to teach him about why his behavior wasn't appropriate.

Children experience tumultuous emotions, and helping them to control their feelings, while trying to get them to learn better behavior, isn't easy. Most adults tend to try to lecture and reason with children. However, when a child's brain is clouded with reactive feelings, it's almost impossible to engage with them in a meaningful way.

## **Discipline Mistakes Parents Make**

While the authors are careful not to blame parents, they do provide common mistakes from which parents can learn.

One of the major disciplining mistakes, is that you can't discipline a child until they've calmed down. Once a child has calmed down, there are a few approaches to creating effective teaching moments. For example, when disciplining a child, parents tend to lecture and talk too much. What

ends up happening in these circumstances is that children filter out what's being said. To deal with this practically, allow children to talk and provide solutions. Connecting in this way will help to develop mindsight.

Mindsight is the ability to solve a problem through empathy and insight. The more mindsight an individual has, the more they will lean towards self-discipline. This is because mindsight encourages people to put themselves in another's shoes. For example, if you see your mother doing the dishes every day, without help from the family, how does this make you feel? If it doesn't bother you, it might be worth asking yourself the question, 'How would I feel if I had to do the dishes every day?'

Inflexibility is another common problem. Parents and caregivers need to be flexible. It's pointless trying to teach someone, if you're unable to show flexibility, because every learner, and every learning experience is different. All children are different, and the degrees of emotional development between each age group is vast. This is why it's so important to be aware of your emotional responses and reactions. The advice here, is to "chase the why."

As an example, your child may start misbehaving in class and distracting her classmates. Rather than punish her for this behavior, "chasing the why" suggests finding out the reasons behind this behavior. Perhaps she likes the attention, or is being pressured to act a certain way to fit in. The point is that once you find out why something is happening, it's a lot easier to address it. Furthermore, by finding out why something is occurring, as a parent or caregiver, you'll be able to be more flexible in how you choose to respond.

Choosing to frame situations more positively is another way to exhibit flexibility. For example, if a child doesn't want to eat his vegetables, a

parent might say something like, 'if you don't eat your vegetables, you won't get any dessert.' Whereas reframing this to, 'there's dessert waiting for you when you finish your vegetables', is a much more positive response.

## **H.A.L.T**

Setting boundaries is one of the cornerstones of effective parenting. Boundaries need to be very clear, and very consistent. By setting boundaries, you'll be able to navigate the tumultuous world of the childhood tantrum, because you'll have more insight and control over behavior that you may not have previously understood.

When dealing with certain behaviors and reactions, the authors suggest the "One, Two, Three Halt," approach. The acronym HALT stands for, hungry, angry, lonely, and tired.

By going through the acronym, you'll be a step closer to answering the question as to why your child behaved in a certain way. Once you know whether they've acted out of hunger, anger, loneliness, or overtiredness, you'll be able to develop a strategy to engage with them. What's more, you'll be able to know what to teach them at that particular moment.

## **In Conclusion**

The use of insightful and relatable case studies, makes this a go-to book for any parent or caregiver struggling with disciplining their children. By considering a child's development, we're shown that conflict resolution can be peaceful and drama-free. However, the authors recognize that there will be times when you don't get it right, but during such times you'll

be able to reflect and readjust in order to do better next time. Furthermore, this collaborative approach to discipline means that anyone can learn these skills, which will benefit every family member. And the skills developed by your child will translate into later life.

Finally, the idea is to connect to correct or redirect. R.E.D.I.R.E.C.T will help us to learn how to reduce our words, embrace emotions, describe rather than lecture, involve your child, reframe "no" into a conditional "yes," emphasize the positive, creatively approach the situation, and finally, teach "mindsight tools."

So next time you witness a tantrum in a grocery store, it might be time to break out a copy of *No-Drama Discipline*.