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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 eat all your vegetables, *then* you can have dessert.

If you are good at the shops, *then* I'll buy you a treat at the checkout.

If you behave when Grandma comes over, *then* we can watch TV when she leaves.

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 eat your vegetables, then you won't get any dessert".

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... at least, not most of the time (but sometimes it is. We all know it!)

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 so 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.

It's time to pack up the toys, but instead of yelling out "If these toys don't get picked up, then I'm throwing them away", try getting down on the ground with them and working as a team. Our kids want to be involved in our world. So, if we're doing something, and we invite them to join in, chances are that they'll say yes, even for something as routine as tidying up the toys.

Make it fun.

Kids love to play! In fact, it's been demonstrated that kids learn things much easier and quicker if play is involved. So next time you're at the shops, see if you can make a scavenger hunt. Challenge them to find the biggest capsicum, or maybe you can set the timer and see how quickly you can make it down each aisle. There are so many ways to make even simple tasks fun.

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 to eat some vegetables at dinner time. What vegetables would you like us to cook today?"

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, that Grandma doesn't like loud noises, so we need to be a bit quieter when she's visiting, you're setting them up for success. 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 being quiet when Grandma is here, you can go outside for a bit to get some of your energy out before you come back in."

Be proactive.

Asking your child to be well behaved at the shops when they're hungry is just not going to happen. Likewise, your child just isn't going to be as helpful when it comes to packing up the toys if they're tired after a long day. Try shifting the timing for these activities, reducing your expectations, or making it easier to meet your expectations by setting up the environment for success.

Stick firmly to loving limits.

They're getting rowdy in the store. Carry them out calmly, explaining that we can go back when they're ready to use walking feet and quiet voices.

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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