

Guidance and Discipline for Skill Building Podcast

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello. I'm Annmarie McMahon with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University, and this is the ParentingMontana.org podcast. In this ParentingMontana.org podcast, we'll be learning about guidance and discipline for skill building.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Guidance and discipline for skill building is really about being deliberate and purposeful.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I'd like to introduce our guest for today, Jennifer Miller. Jennifer has 20 years of experience working with adults to help them become more effective with children through social and emotional learning. She is the author and illustrator of the book, *Confident Parents, Confident Kids, Raising Emotional Intelligence in Ourselves and Our Kids from Toddlers to Teenagers*. Jennifer is also the contributing expert to NBC's *Today Parenting*. In addition, she's contributed to a lot of articles and expertise in popular publications like the *Washington Post*, the *Huffington Post*, and *Edutopia*. And, most importantly, she's the mom of a 12-year-old son, and she makes her home in Ohio. So, welcome, Jennifer.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Thank you, Annmarie. It's a treat. I'm looking forward to our topic today.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Oh, good. So, today we're going to talk about guidance and discipline for skill building. And, my first question is just, what does this mean? And why is that important?

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah. Guidance and discipline for skill building is really about being deliberate and purposeful as a parent or any caregiver in how you support your child through the missteps and mistakes that naturally happen with development. They necessarily need to test boundaries. And, so how we handle that can be a skill building opportunity. We can always look at those moments and transform those moments into opportunities to build skills like self control, like learning responsibility. So, they are a social and emotional skill building moment.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Alright. So, what I'm hearing you say is that parents can provide guidance and discipline while growing skills and overall improve their relationship with their child.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah, that's key. I think looking for opportunities to build skills also enhances your trust with your child so that instead of jumping to scolding or responding with a raised tone of voice, if we step back and take a moment and think about how we could use it as a teachable moment, it actually can deepen our trust between parent and child and use it as a moment where we can develop these social and emotional skills that we know are so critical in life.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, at what age is guidance and discipline for skill building appropriate?

JENNIFER MILLER:

Well, you can teach social and emotional skills from birth all the way through emerging adulthood. And I think that we have created specific tools for promoting guidance and discipline. And, correct me if I'm wrong, Annmarie, but I think it's two or three on up to 19. Is that correct?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yeah. Parenting Montana does have that sort of starting at two. And so, what's the difference between zero to two and two to 19?

JENNIFER MILLER:

It's really awareness. Babies, infants, and toddlers are not yet aware enough to push boundaries. But, when they hit about the age of two, three, and we can feel it as parents, they are ready to take risks. They're ready to take chances. They're ready to push back. They learn that word, "no," and they use it over and over again. And, it can really push our buttons. So, because it can push our buttons, we can react in ways, maybe, that we were reacted to as children from our parents. But, there may be ways that we don't want to react -- that we think at the end of the night, "Ah, I lost my patience. I lost my temper." And so, the tools really help us be focused. We can calm down in that moment if we're frustrated and say, "This could be that transformative moment where I could teach a sense of responsibility, I could teach self-control. And so, I'm going to stop. I'm going to pause. I'm going to think about the tools and how I can turn this into a teachable moment."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

For our younger kids though, our zero to two, it's a little bit different. So, what does that look like for the zero to two range?

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah. So, for the zero to two, and I would say all the way through. But, specifically for zero to two, it's more about parenting self control or caregiver self control, right? So, it is difficult to listen to a baby cry for two hours. And babies, most babies, research confirms -- they cry two to three hours a day. So, for a caregiver, that can really wear on your last

nerve. And, of course, we know that babies are becoming sensitized to the world. There are many things that can go on with a baby. Even if you've, you've diapered, you've fed, you've given naps, and still they're crying -- a caregiver can just be so frustrated.

And so, in those moments, with those young children, how do we build our own self control in those moments? And, in other words, how do we step back? How do we pause? How do we make sure they're safe? But then, also, how do we take care of ourselves? We take some deep breaths. I know moms that use the Calm app and turn on those soothing nature sounds. And, they breathe so that they can really sustain themselves during crying, so that they'll be there for their baby but also maintain that self control that can be so challenging.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, it sounds like it's important to really, as a parent or in a parenting role, be educated about child development and make sure that our expectations are realistic and be able to help identify strategies that are not only age appropriate, but just being aware of our child's changing needs. Is that what you would say?

JENNIFER MILLER:

It's so true. When you look at the research on parenting resilience, how we can deal with our stress and sustain our patience over time, it comes down to understanding our children's development. It's key. Honing our own social and emotional skills so that we can use those things like self control, sense of responsibility, and learn ways to hone them in our children. And, a third component of parenting resilience is asking for support. When we don't feel like we know how to transform it into a teachable moment, how can we ask for help? And, sometimes that's hard, but I think that all parents and caregivers require support. It takes a village, right? And so, we can't be shy about seeking out educational resources, confidants, grandparents, whatever supports we can find to help us be the parents that we want to be.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That's great. So, at ParentingMontana.org, there's a lot of information on this topic. There's tools for every age, from zero to 19. There's two I Want to Know More resources that focus on guidance and discipline for skill building and logical consequences. And, there's a how-to video. But, even with all of that information, I still have some questions. And, I imagine I'm not the only parent that really struggles with this topic. So, if I can, here's an issue that I had when my son was younger.

My son is a young adult now, but I remember bedtime was such an issue. And, I remembered that he always managed to have multiple requests. He needed water. He needed to go to the bathroom. The door was closed too much. The door was open too much. He needed to be tucked in again. And, it would be 9:30 at night, and he'd continue to get out of bed. And, bedtime started at like 8:00. And so, I'd lead him back to bed, try to address his request as quickly as I could, and tuck him back in again. But, some nights it would escalate to him crying, or he could not calm himself back down again. So, I would go in and to help, but I feared that teaching - keep going back - that I

was teaching him that if he cried long enough and loud enough that I'd come back in. And, at that point, I'm frustrated and he's frustrated. Is this a place where guidance and discipline for skill building comes in? And what advice would you have given me that at that time?

JENNIFER MILLER:

So, bedtime is such a challenge for parents, and it's perennial, right? Babies won't sleep at night, and you think it's going to go away when they become school age. And, it doesn't. And then they become teenagers, and it becomes a fight of, "I can stay up as late as I want, all my friends do." So, bedtime is one of those challenges that is persistent throughout parenting. And, also, I would say a simple, "Yes." Guidance and discipline for skill building absolutely applies. I think it applies any time you say, "This is a true challenge for me as a parent." It always applies.

But, there's two pieces that you can think about here. One is what can you do in the moment when maybe your son is crying because he's so upset with ... First of all, he's overtired, overstimulated, up late, and also frustrated that you won't give him the kind of attention that he's really seeking. And, you've had a long day of work and parenting. You're exhausted. Your self control is completely gone. So, the challenge of bedtime is also that our patience has been used up throughout the day, and we're kind of done and ready for them to go to sleep and for us to have our own sacred time. So, the two pieces are, what do you do in the moment when you're frustrated? And, then how can you step out of that circumstance and think proactively about becoming intentional about the bedtime routine and how you can set your child up for success? So, which part do you want to talk about first, Annmarie? Do you want to talk about the, in the moment frustration? Yeah? You're shaking your head.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yeah, because I remember that. Just feeling so torn like, "No, I have to have structure here!" But, then I'd been working all day and maybe felt guilty that I hadn't had a lot of time with him. So, maybe he's wanting my time, and I should do ... So, yeah. I think we should start there.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah. When it is late, when your child is overstimulated, and they're wiggling, and they're anxious, and they've got all kinds of needs, and your frustration level has peaked, it is a good time to think about a coping strategy that will help both of you. So, is there a way that you can calm down with him again? Maybe it's playing nature sounds. Maybe you do a guided relaxation where you tense up your muscles and then you let them relax. Is there a way that you can go through a relaxation process for both of you at the same time so that you're giving him some attention, which he clearly wants? But, you're also helping both of you calm down because both of you need it. And then, it is after that, a quick goodnight. Maybe it's a hug and a kiss, and I'll see you in the morning and leaving. And, if he's out of bed coming back, "I need this. I need that. I need water. I need a snack," whatever. Goes on and on, right? If that happens, then you are as brief and boring as possible, brief and boring. In other words, there's no more

attention given. We're going to take care of your needs, help yourself to the restroom, whatever, but we're done with all social interaction. We did our love. We did our calming down, and now we're done. And, now it is just taking care of business and going to bed.

I have coached a lot of parents on this, where, especially with little ones, I have them just hold their hand, not say a word, but guide them back to bed and say, "good night" and leave. And, just keep doing that. And, it is a practice that your child will learn.

Okay, we've done it all. The routine is over. We're done for the day. But, then I think coming away from that and asking yourself, "Do we have an adequate bedtime routine? Are we really in good shape? Is my child getting enough sleep at night?" And, what I encourage parents to do is don't look it up yourself. Look it up with your child. What does science say your age child requires in order to get enough sleep at night? Now, I have a 12-year-old. For a 12-year-old, it's between 10 and 11 hours. If I look it up with him, then it's not mom being a pain. It is science that is telling us this is what he needs.

Now, another thing that is really important is shutting down screens an hour before bedtime. Screens are known that the light will keep your brain active and keep a child up at night. And, it will completely derail your bedtime routine.

So, how can you set the conditions? Low lighting. Reading is wonderful before bedtime. How can you create a plan together? In other words, sit down with your whole family and say, "Okay, what business do we need to take care of?" Brushing teeth, getting into pajamas, and then can we front load the business so that on the backend we look forward to connecting. Is there a story time? If you're a religious family, is there a prayer, or are there just grateful thoughts that you talk about? Do you do pillow talk, what's your connecting that's on the back end of business? And then, and then you've got a pretty good routine. Everybody knows who's taking responsibility for what? And, when you get into that routine, hopefully you've written it down. It's better if your child writes it and illustrates it, because they have a sense of ownership.

You post it near your child's bedroom or in your child's bedroom. And, you say, "What's next? Oh, brush teeth. That's great. Go do it." Instead of saying, "Time to brush your teeth. Time to brush your teeth." Right? We get into this nagging routine and our children anticipate it and expect it. And, sometimes we train them to the point where they won't move until we've raised our voice, because it doesn't get serious. And so, we raise our voice. But, if we expect that they understand their responsibilities, they know the plan and you just ask them to work the plan and you expect that they'll get their business taken care of. And, there's good stuff on the other side of business, there's a story, or there's some pillow talk. Then you're setting them up for success.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Well, I like that, because, that it keeps the connection and it gives... I think him... it would have given him a sense of independence over the plan that we've created. And, I also think it's interesting that that really gives me a good example of why this is not just a topic about discipline, but it's guidance and discipline for skill building. Because, I remember finding myself going to the place of yelling or the "tomorrow you're going to bed an hour earlier." But, this just takes that and transforms it into, well, guiding him in

these choices and building his skills along the way of independence and the routine. And, that makes a lot of sense.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah. If you have a plan, if you've talked about the plan when you're not in the bedtime routine, and you've said to your child, "Are there things that are difficult for you? Are there things that you need support with?" And, then you are confident, your child really knows their responsibilities. We've talked about it. They've got it down. We know when they're going to do it. We know how they're going to do it. Then when you get to that routine, the child has a greater sense of responsibility and of confidence. Mom trusts that I'm going to get this accomplished. And, when we're finished, we've got good stuff to look forward to. So, might as well get it done.

I also love timers, because our children are on a very different timeframe than we are. And, our goals are different at night. Our goals are different many times, but at night the goal is stay up for kids. At night the goal is get to bed for parents, right? So, I see one minute timers. Those are wonderful. Those little hourglass one-minute timers, and give it to them. They can control it. It's fun. They get to set it. They get to watch it, but that moves the process along when they're not motivated to move the process along.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, I can see how this works when we're talking about a routine, like all of this makes sense to me and would have saved me. Would have saved me a lot of grief, I think, back in the day. But, what happens if my child would have done something that sort of ups the ante a little bit? Like how do you talk about guidance and discipline for skill building when it's something like my son has hit me, or maybe he hit another child on the playground? Does that warrant a stronger reaction from me?

JENNIFER MILLER:

Well, I would say you're going to have a strong reaction, because you're human. If your child hits another child, or if a child hits you, it is going to get your emotions raised. So, I think first of all, you're right. When it is a more serious issue like that, we have to acknowledge that we are going to have big feelings when those things happen. But yet, we know that when we are really angry or really frustrated, we likely will not react in ways that later that night we'll say, "Oh, I was really proud of how I reacted." It's not likely. So, we really ... It's great if we can plan ahead for those moments to know that we need to take some time to take care of ourselves. And, it doesn't have to be complicated.

If a teacher is telling us that our child hit another child on the playground, and we can feel the flames rising from our head, we can just take a moment before we address our child. We can walk away. We can breathe. We can calm down enough for our full brain to regain power and not to just be in fight, flight, or freeze mode. So that we can really think about how we can transform it into a teachable moment. If we expect that when we are super angry or super frustrated, we're going to come up with some magical solution that's socially and emotionally intelligent, then we're not acknowledging our

humanity. It's super human, and it's just not possible. So, then how can we be real about ourselves in those circumstances? Take that pause. And, by the way, when we take that pause, we are getting a two-fer. Our children are learning self control as they watch us maintain self control. And then say, "How can we transform this into a skill building moment?"

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, now that my son is older, his behavior seems... everything comes with a lot more risk or there's a lot of higher consequences at stake. So, here's an example. So, lately he's coming home late and keeping me up worrying. And, I realize that when he strolls in past the time that I find acceptable, I should cool down before I talked to him. But, sometimes I feel like I want him to see me worry, like in the moment. And, I want him to know that I'm worried, and then I'm exhausted. And, I stayed up late waiting for him. If I don't address the behavior in the moment, do you feel like some of the impact is lost or as a parent, do I always wait to sort of calm down to address the behavior?

JENNIFER MILLER:

That is so important. I'm so glad that you brought that up, and the truth is -- I am not encouraging hiding your feelings at all. In fact, I think that your son seeing that you're worried, understanding that you're frustrated, is super important. That's how you maintain trust, because that's honesty, right? If you're hiding all your emotions, they can't really know the impact that they're having on you. They say that - research says that - guilt can be a really positive emotion. It promotes moral thinking, and it helps us think about the logical consequences or outcomes of our actions. The thing that we don't want to do is shame. And so, if we scold immediately, that turns into shame where our child is feeling like "I'm a bad person because my mom is yelling at me."

But, if we say, "I need a minute, I am so frustrated. I was freaked out tonight. You were late again. And, I thought we had this discussion. I'm so ... I just need some time and let's talk tomorrow. Why don't you go to bed, because clearly I'm not in good shape to talk about it." That's powerful. And powerful for your son to hear and, and still maintains your trusting relationship. And, tomorrow, certainly, you will be socially and emotionally intelligent, because you've had a whole night to think about how you can respond. But, I don't think you need to be silent. I think that your son hearing how you're feeling is really important.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Is it ever okay to take a more authoritative stance? Like when we've addressed the issue for the 10th time, or maybe we're in a situation where I judge the wheels are starting to fall off.

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yeah. So, I'm not sure without specifics what you mean. But, I think that logical consequences that you talk through are valid -- important to teach what happens in the real world. If you're late for a business meeting, you can get fired. So, talking through

logical consequences is really important. The thing that I would caution with is that if it smells like punishment, then what a child says is, "Mom just wants to hurt me." And the lesson is lost. That the idea of them learning responsibility is lost, because they're lost in the feelings of "Mom's trying to insert pain into my life. She just... she's after me. She doesn't understand me." So, the idea is if you can calm down and bring down some of the emotion of it from your side, how can you talk about what the impact is on your family?

How can you talk about the fear that you have as a mom, dealing with safety issues and what could happen? And, how can you talk about the need for responsibility and what he'll need to understand in order to become an independent adult? And, it could be that there are specific consequences to that. Like we're going to have to look at taking a pause. I don't like to use grounding, but give it some time before you go out with your friends, this same crowd again, because it's clearly not working out for us.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Let's talk about that. You mentioned punishment. What's the difference between this guidance and discipline for skill building and punishment? Because, there's a difference there.

JENNIFER MILLER:

There is a difference. And, I think sometimes it can be subtle. But, I think the difference is really in the intention that you bring to how you react to your child's misbehavior. Is your goal teaching a social and emotional skill? Like problem solving? Like taking responsibility? Like focusing attention? Executive functions? Is that your goal? If that is your goal, and you're looking for ways with your child to do that, then it is guidance and discipline for skill building.

If you are looking for ways for them to feel the pain of the hurt that they've caused, then we might even call that revenge. And, that's really in the punishment category. So, it is our training. So, I offer grace to all of us parenting that this is how we were parented. It's not easy, but if we step back and say, "How can we teach essential skills and how can we use our own essential skills, self control, and responsibility to teach that sense of responsibility?" That's how it's different.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, that is very different than how I was raised. And, I find it hard when my patience is low and I'm tired not to revert back to how I was raised. And, I think you made a good point that punishment doesn't teach sort of how to be better in the long term. And, it really never made me feel closer to my parents. And so, only our conversations about the issue seemed to do that.

So, here's one other question that seems to come up is that, growing up, my husband and I had very different experiences and backgrounds and personal histories. And, I feel like we bring all of those strengths and weaknesses into our parenting. But, what happens if we don't agree on guidance and discipline for skill building? Do you have any

advice on how to navigate that between two parents that doesn't always lead to tension and conflict?

JENNIFER MILLER:

Yes, I do. I've learned the hard way. I think we all do. I think part of it is that we need to offer grace to the other parent -- that we give them the space to parent in the way that they need to. And, that we are going to bring our training from our own childhood for better or for worse to our parenting circumstances. And, it is really hard to watch when you're making improvements or trying to take a skill building approach and your partner is taking authoritarian approaches. Maybe they're yelling and scolding, and you're trying not to.

So, I think allowing for change is important. Allowing for improvement is important, but also giving grace and space for parents to do their thing and then walk away and say, "Did it work? How are you feeling about it?" And spend some time reflecting on it and talking about if you're not feeling good, then how could ... These are some things that I'm trying out? Is this something you would try with me? How can we work together on this? And really trying to establish a partnership, a reflective partnership, around the learning process. Because, it's not easy for any of us.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

This has been great. I thank you so much for joining us today just to have some of these conversations. Jennifer Miller, author and illustrator of *Confident Parents, Confident Kids*.

And so, just the key takeaway as I'm reflecting back on the conversations that we had is that we can be purposeful and deliberate in the ways that we're providing guidance and discipline. And, we can approach it as a skill building and a teachable moment for our kids and to grow our kids' skills and really to enrich our relationship with them at the same time.

So, for more information on guidance and discipline for skill building, check out the how-to video of the same name in the media section of ParentingMontana.org and additional information in the I Want to Know More section of ParentingMontana.org. So again, thank you so much for joining us today.

JENNIFER MILLER:

What a treat. I love the real life circumstances that you posed. They were wonderful, and I think produced such a richer conversation.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Oh great. So, and then to all of our listeners, just keep checking back for additional podcasts that will be coming, tools and more resources being added to ParentingMontana.org. So, thank you.

34:59 VOICEOVER:

The ParentingMontana.org podcast is produced by the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University in collaboration with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services and is brought to you by the Offices of Child Care, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

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