

## EVERY ADULT IS A SUPERMODEL!



It is easy for adults to forget how hard it must be for young children to figure out what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Learning acceptable behaviour is complex in part because what is acceptable depends on the situation. For example, it is okay to throw a ball outside but not inside; it is okay to fill a cup with water when you are in the wading pool and tip it out on the grass or on yourself, but it is not okay to tip your cup of juice onto the kitchen floor. Adults understand these things (usually!), but for under three year olds, many of these distinctions are not obvious.

Sometimes what is acceptable depends on who is making the rules. For example, maybe Mum lets you jump on the bed but Dad doesn't, or Grandma allows you to pick flowers from her garden but Dad isn't too pleased when you do the same thing at home. And sometimes even the same adult responds differently to the same situation at different times.

It is easy to forget that much of children's most powerful learning is through modelling what they see others doing and saying around them. Sometimes modelling may be direct and obvious, when the adult says in effect, "Look at what I am doing or listen to what I am saying and do it this way". More often modelling happens quietly and subtly, almost without anyone being aware of it. Adults often realise the power of modelling when they hear a young child doing or saying something unacceptable, that they have said on occasion. For example, the young child who drops his ice cream may utter the same word (with the same amount of feeling) that she heard her dad say when he knocked his glass full of beer over at the picnic! Very effective learning, but not generally considered appropriate!

Children learn so much more from what adults do than from what they tell them to do. This means that adults need to make sure that they are putting into practice what they are asking children to do. For example, if "please" and "thank you" are important then children will pick them up if adults use them. If shouting is not acceptable, then the adult must not shout.

To complicate things further, there is a difference between understanding what you *should* do and quite another to have the will power or self control to do it. If you doubt that, just ask a smoker who has tried to give up smoking or a veteran dieter! So if you are a very young child, you may have a pretty good idea that Mum and Dad won't be pleased if you press the buttons on the VCR, but you just may not be able to stop yourself because it's so much fun to do it.

Discipline is the help adults provide children so that they eventually know what is and is not acceptable, and so they want to do what is acceptable. Discipline is something very different to punishment. Discipline is one of the most important and complicated areas of learning and behaviour that adults and children struggle with over the first three years. Discipline actually begins at birth, in the relationships and interactions young babies have with the important people around them.

Sometimes adults think of discipline as something special and set apart from other kinds of teaching and learning that happen. Learning about acceptable behaviour is very similar to learning about other things. Adults can apply much of what makes sense in teaching and learning in other areas of children's lives to teaching and learning acceptable behaviour. In other words, the ways children learn such things as putting on shoes, using the toilet, the names of colours and shapes, or how to catch a ball are the same as the ways they learn such things as how, when and to whom to show affection, ways of dealing with conflict and anger, self control and how to show respect for the rights of others.

It is tempting to hope that children will be better than we are, and this causes us to sometimes have higher expectations for them than we do for ourselves, for example, in the area of sharing. This is unrealistic.

The most important learning that children do in the early years has to do with showing care and respect for others. They learn this most powerfully from the way they are treated. Children learn the most by being with, watching and listening to the people who are special to them. This means that the most important thing for adults to remember in living with young children is to be sure that they **PRACTICE WHAT THEY PREACH.**

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