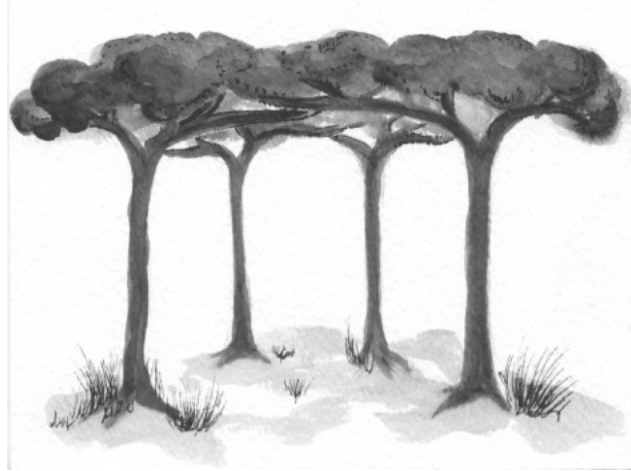


DISCIPLINE AND THE FOUR PILLARS OF SIMPLICITY

An excerpt from *The Soul of Discipline*, by Kim John Payne, M. Ed

HOW TO DIAL BACK THE OUTSIDE PRESSURES

“Before simplifying our family life, whatever I said to my kids seemed to set them off and make them goofy or defiant. After calming down the pace of our days and giving more down time, everything became easier. What I especially noticed was that when I had to give a direction or make a transition, my kids would come along in a much better way.” With the growth of the Simplicity Parenting community and practices, like this mother who made this comment, countless parents have experienced a direct relationship between dialing back the pace and pressure of daily life with improvements in their kids’ behavior.



There are four key ways you can immediately reduce these pressures and prevent a child from becoming disoriented and pushing back against your directions. If you’ve read my book, *Simplicity Parenting*, some of these concepts will be familiar to you, but it’s important to revisit them in the context of discipline:

1. Balance and simplify the amount of stuff your child or teen has (i.e. books, toys, clothes)
2. Strengthen rhythm and predictability
3. Balance and simplify the amount of scheduled activities
4. Filter out the amount of adult conversation

In a follow-up article, we will take this one step further by looking at the huge behavioral benefits of filtering out the adult world by going low-screen or no-screen.

ONE: SIMPLIFYING THE AMOUNT OF STUFF

A great starting point for dialing it down is to clear out the clutter. Reduce the number of books, toys, clothes, gadgets and other extraneous items in a kid's room and around the house in general. Countless parents have reported that, when they reduce physical clutter, their child's or teen's behavior improves. This makes sense if you consider what happens in the mental and emotional life of a child when she has less. When you have fewer things, what you *do* have becomes precious. And if you are playing with other kids, you learn how to share what little you have. The more a child's imagination becomes fired up by one little object—that blanket they're putting over a frame, those two cars they drive along the living room rug, that plank of wood that becomes a roof—whatever it is, it's very likely they will find multiple uses for it, since there aren't that many other options. When this happens, the limbic system and the frontal lobe of your child's brain, which stimulate collaboration and cooperation, are encouraged to develop. The limbic system is critical for emotional processing and behavior and has also been connected to the development of emotional health, social cooperation and empathy.

Parents who have adopted the Simplicity approach say things like, "When I've got less stuff around, my three kids actually fight *less*. Isn't that strange?" It may seem counterintuitive. But, in fact, when there are fewer things to play with, kids have to collaborate more. They can't dart about from one toy or digital device to another, a behavior pattern that stimulates the amygdala, which in turn triggers our primal flight-or-fight response. A child with too many toys and gadgets is likely to develop unhealthy play, rather than good, creative interaction. The area of brain that develops as a child learns to find multiple uses for a single toy is also related to the building up of social cooperation. The positive changes in behavior and cooperation you see when you simplify your child's or teen's home environment may appear magical, but they are grounded in developmental fact.

Having your children play in a cooperative way means a parent needs to arbitrate much less to sort out conflicts. Why wait until there is fighting over toys to be forced to intervene remove them? Do it proactively and enjoy the giggles and long moments of quiet play with the few simple toys you thoughtfully provide.

TWO: RHYTHM AND PREDICTABILITY

The best way to handle behavioral flashpoints—the times each day when your child is especially difficult—is to establish rhythm and predictability. Classic flashpoint moments are getting out to the car in the morning, sitting down to homework after school, and bedtime—with its attendant bathing and teeth brushing rituals. If you pay close attention, you can actually feel or see these rough patches coming, and prepare for them. Recognition is a first step toward building rhythm and a different (positive) kind of predictability into the day.

We often brace for impact as those challenging times of the day approach. We strap on our defenses and say “wish me luck, I’m going in” as we open the door, make a suggestion, or pull up to the curb to interact with the child we know will be out of sorts. It’s hard to feel centered when we are anticipating trouble. We may come on too strong, “shouty,” or overly stern. “I am serious now. There will be consequences for any misbehavior!” we say when our daughter is splashing away merrily in the bathtub! In such a situation, you’ve preemptively disciplined—and perhaps even scared your child (who may or may not have been about to do that naughty thing she did in the bath last time). Or we can go the opposite route and become tentative and unsure of ourselves, “Let’s see if we can, um, who would like to get into the bath now?” The positive, middle-road approach *is* rhythm. Turning these times of day into smooth repetitive rituals not only helps center a child but also shores up the foundations of parental calmness.

To establish a rhythm, mix the big and the small picture realities. The “big” is to try as best we can to have the event happen at the same time each day. That might mean that you have a specific time on weekdays and you relax a bit on weekends. But the key is to have semi-flexible times and stick to them. The “small” way to build rhythm zeros in on all the little details. It’s about having the soap in the same exact place, the toothbrush and toothpaste laid out in

the same manner, the towel folded just so. For older kids, it could work like this: If your son or daughter make their school lunch in the morning, adding rhythm would mean making the sandwiches in the same place on the counter, on the same cutting board with the food laid out pretty much exactly the same way each morning.

You might wonder that all this emphasis on rhythm seems a bit too boring and routine. Don't we want creative and spontaneous homes (subtext... *chaotic*)? One mom once said that she came from a home where everything was "locked into tedious routine." She was understandably wary of recreating this dynamic with her own kids. But there is an important distinction to be made between routine and rhythm. A routine is a cold, repeated series of actions. It often involves sending a child away from you to do a chore. It separates you from the flow of family life. Rhythm, on the other hand, is warm, often fun, and connects you with siblings and parents. Tasks that are rhythmic are often done with a parent being quietly interested in how the child is getting on. The same exact task can be routine or rhythmic. The way in which you approach and implement your strategy makes all the difference. The task becomes rhythmical when a parent performs it *with* the child or teen. You are moving through the day together, chatting and laughing as you connect. The task itself becomes secondary to the connection that develops as you work together.

One mother of a "squirrely" young daughter told me this shift in perspective made all the difference for her family: "Everything used to be hard and 'wrestly.' Now we look forward to the exact same times of the day I used to dread. Who would have guessed?"

When you've built rhythm into the fabric of your child's day, you actually free up the possibility for the kind of spontaneity that used to keep everyone on edge. Living a rhythm-filled life allows us to launch (or lurch) into the unexpected or be just plain goofy. Here's one dad's story:

"We were sitting at dinner one evening when I burst out with, "Who wants to go and see the UConn women's basketball game?!" My two daughters, then 10 and 12, shouted, "We do!" My wife looked surprised. She knows well that the college basketball environment is high velocity, super-loud, and raucous. And we are supposed to be the 'simplicity rhythm family,' right? She then asked, "When is the game?" "It starts in 30 minutes," I said sheepishly. Without

missing a beat (well maybe one or two), she announced, "Come on let's go! Let's just pack up supper and eat it in the car."

Thirty minutes later we were walking into that modern day pleasure dome known as a basketball arena. My girls stood wide-eyed, mouths agape: there were Jumbotron video screens flashing, cheer leaders launched into the air and caught by muscular young men and t-shirt cannons firing T-shirts high into the crowd of many thousands.

We got home at 10:15 (on a school night) and moved into rhythmical autopilot. The dinner "debris" was cleared away, baths were taken and teeth and hair brushed. I turned out the light at 10:40 pm but was amazed at how everyone just knew what to do and got on with it. The next day, the girls slid right back into the rhythms and grooves of the day and were fine. There were no signs of grumpiness or out-of-whack behavior. I am certainly no superstar parent, but I now know from experience that the strong and simple rhythms that run through our family life help keep us calm and open up the possibility for spontaneous fun."

If you are doing your best to make life rhythmical but still feel things are a bit too hectic, you will want to work on Rhythm's sibling strategy: Predictability. While it may not have quite the power of rhythm, predictability can still bring a vital sense of security to a child.

Predictability also has big and small picture realities. The "big" approach to predictability is to help your child create a mental road map of the coming day. Some parents will sit with their child or teen at night and do a quick next day run through. You have to be careful not to over-describe. Leave as much as possible to the kid's imagination. Some parents join the child in visualizing various major points in the coming day at bedtime. Others simply ask what their child's "rose and thorn" were in the day that has just ended, and what "thorn and rose" she might foresee for the coming day. A "rose" is a happy event and a "thorn" is something that was or will be challenging.

If you decide to adopt previewing the day ahead, pay some attention to the flashpoint moments in which your child or teen typically struggles. If the mood is right, you can even make a simple plan about how to deal with any problems that come up. But it's often enough just to picture and recognize

that these are sometimes hard moments. This helps these difficult experiences become more like shared conundrums.

The “small” approach to predictability and previewing is to break down what the next few steps will be for your child: “Toby, we’ll be going upstairs and getting ready for bed soon. I’m just going to finish off the dishes first.” You are giving a child a preview of what is about to happen rather than just scooping her up and whooshing her up the stairs. Having a predictable, rhythmical life is critical to experiencing far fewer difficult disciplinary moments in your family.

THREE: SCHEDULING

Kids need time to process and digest what happens around them. Many parents and educators are worried about the erosion of playtime at school, in daycare, and even at home, due to over-scheduling. Play for a young child and downtime for a tween or teenager are critical to healthy emotional and social development. Rather than stuff our children’s lives with back-to-back activities, we need to embrace the gift of boredom, because boredom is the precursor to creativity.

When a child is bored we do not have to immediately scramble to set up activities. In fact, when we introduce new activities to help our children alleviate their boredom, we increase their push-back. This might sound counterintuitive, given the fact that parents worry that their children will misbehave if they allow them to be idle. Such parents think busy schedules are the best way to avoid discipline problems. A mother of three wrote the following in a letter she sent me a few months after a discipline workshop: “When I had my first child, I was quite unsure about a lot of things. But most of all I didn’t know what to do about discipline. I thought the best ways to avoid discipline problems was to keep him busy. I enrolled him in classes and sports and he seemed to go along with it but he would become fresh and difficult at home. So I enrolled him in more activities. His behavior did not improve. If anything, he became more disrespectful. He would ignore me... To be honest, I was setting up a situation where we would not spend all that much time together as nothing much enjoyable seemed to come about during these times. While all this was developing, I had my second child and I pretty much followed the same pattern for her and the same difficult behavior happened.

Having a new baby brought me to your workshop, as I knew something had to change. I thought I had messed up twice and I was not going to do it again... I came away with ideas for my older two kids and not just for my baby. I have cut way back on their activities and it was surprising that neither of them seemed to mind all that much. Now they love it... what seemed to be most important was that I was around and available without having to do much in terms of playing with them. I took a deep breath and let them be bored and it worked just like we talked about. They started [playing] all manner of funny little games that they would invent. My eldest boy particularly got into building forts in our yard... We are now closer as a family and there is less fighting and fewer explosions. I still have to resist putting them back in a bunch of activities because everybody else seems to be doing it, which makes me feel guilty. But all I have to do is remember how it was last year and I am fine with the way things are now..."

What is most touching about this mom's experience is that she discovered for herself something powerful: The more she had tried to withdraw from her kids' lives (by scheduling them to spend time in activities with others) the more they had tried to draw her back in, the best way they knew how, by acting out and challenging her. She realized that they were doing this not to be "bad" but to bond with her. And she mustered up the courage to stand apart from the "new normal" in which so many parents super schedule their kids, and allow her own crew down time and even boredom.

What should you do when your children next moan about being bored? Resist the urge to find them something to do and instead, out-bore the boredom! You have to become really boring and leave them alone to solve the puzzle of what to do with their newfound alone time. One caveat/tip: If you're dealing with more than one child at a time, try separating them. Maybe hold one close and send one to do a chore, or just give them space—but not together because they might relieve their boredom by fighting with each other. Keep them separate for 15 to 30 minutes and you'll be amazed at the creativity that breaks out. Their inner world and creative juice starts flowing.

Children digest all the busy-ness of the outside world through play. That's how they process what they encounter. Believe it or not, if you provide the space for children to play and have lots and lots of down time, you will deal with fewer disciplinary issues. A child can be self-orienting if she is provided with rhythm, time to digest, plenty of downtime, and time to play. Then she

will call much less often for adult attention through bad behavior. As parents, we want to build up our child's inner being so that there isn't the need for so much discipline at home. The more we slow down our children's lives and bring rhythm and predictability into each day, the more inner strength and self-esteem they will develop and the less often we will need to discipline them.

FOUR: FILTERING OUT ADULT CONVERSATION & INFORMATION

The fourth principle of simplicity and balance involves the filtering of adult conversation and adult-oriented information out of our children's lives.

The proper degree of separation between the adult world and a child's world is crucial to that child's well being. Yet it's a delicate balance. Too much separation can mean a child does not attach to the parent, and the parent does not bond with her child. If there is too little separation, the child has access to all sorts of adult information and comes to believe that she is her parent's equal. That is not a healthy dynamic either.

If children hear information about world events such as wars, bombings, global warming, rape and famine, they will almost certainly feel that the world is an unsafe place and full of violence. Children know they are vulnerable; they do not have cars to flee in or weapons to fight with. So when we, as a society, allow them access to adult information we erode their sense of safety. We unintentionally provide them with the unconscious message of their utter vulnerability with every news cycle we allow them to see or hear, or adult discussion they overhear because we didn't filter it.

There is so much adult information that our children should not hear. For example, our conversations about Aunt Annie's struggle with cancer; Daddy's trouble at work with his boss; their teacher's weaknesses. When we discuss these adult issues in front of our children, we essentially raise them to our level, and lose our authoritativeness. If we pull all the veils away from the adult world and show ourselves, with all our glaring weaknesses, our children inevitably feel unsafe. Many wonderful, egalitarian-minded parents want to

share too much with their child too early, because they believe their child has a right to know things and will be better off with the truth. But what these parents struggle to recognize is that they are exposing their kids to information that children are not developmentally able to process, and this erodes their sense of safety. The sad irony of this is that rather than raising a globally minded young citizen of the world it can lead to a nervous, anxious and stressed child.

The chrysalis—that protective sheath in which childhood unfolds—can be thinned or even stripped away. We can apply what is happening to our planet as a whole to our children’s feelings of safety in their world. Just as we must not dissolve the protective layers around the earth by polluting the atmosphere with elements that the planet cannot handle, we must not strip away our children’s sheaths by flooding our family atmosphere with information that they cannot handle. As it stands, many of our children suffer from severe emotional sunburns because they’ve been exposed to too much, too soon. Before we say anything in front of our children, we need to ask ourselves four key questions, “Is it kind, is it necessary, is it true and will it help my child feel safe?” Unless you can answer yes to all four of those questions, don’t say it.

IN CONCLUSION:

Balancing and simplifying your kid’s life creates the vessel in which your discipline and guidance can be held. Without this kind of container, much of what you do to support the behavior of your child or teen will be like trying to put new content into a glass already full to the brim and spilling out. This overflow is caused by the *too much, too soon, too sexy, too young* dynamic that has become the normal of modern living. By dialing back the pace of family life, you provide the time for the child to be nourished by absorbing what has already flowed into their cup due to day-to-day life. Balancing their lives makes space for new experiences and in particular, the boundaries you are giving, to be held. As one mother of two children put it, “I thought this was just something small that only I could see but my friends noticed the change and said how much more fun we all seemed to be having. Up until I heard that, I didn’t realize how much better I felt as a parent. Most of all I could just be *me* again.”