

NO-DRAMA DISCIPLINE

THE WHOLE-BRAIN WAY TO
CALM THE CHAOS AND NURTURE YOUR
CHILD'S DEVELOPING MIND



FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF
THE WHOLE-BRAIN CHILD

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INTRODUCTION

Relational, Low-Drama Discipline: Encouraging Cooperation While Building a Child's Brain

You are not alone.

If you feel at a loss when it comes to getting your kids to argue less or speak more respectfully . . . if you can't figure out how to keep your toddler from climbing up to the top bunk, or get him to put on clothes before answering the front door . . . if you feel frustrated having to utter the same phrase over and over again ("Hurry! You're going to be late for school!") or to engage in *another* battle over bedtime or homework or screen time . . . if you've experienced any of these frustrations, you are not alone.

In fact, you're not even unusual. You know what you are? A parent. A human being, and a parent.

It's hard to figure out how to discipline our kids. It just is. All too often it goes like this: They do something they shouldn't do. We get mad. They get upset. Tears flow. (Sometimes the tears belong to the kids.)

It's exhausting. It's infuriating. All the drama, the yelling, the hurt feelings, the guilt, the heartache, the disconnection.

Do you ever find yourself asking, after an especially agonizing interaction with your kids, "Can't I do better than this? Can't I handle

myself better, and be a more effective parent? Can't I discipline in ways that calm the situation rather than create more chaos?" You want the bad behavior to stop, but you want to respond in a way that values and enhances your relationship with your children. You want to build your relationship, not damage it. You want to create less drama, not more.

You can.

In fact, that's the central message of this book: *You really can discipline in a way that's full of respect and nurturing, but that also maintains clear and consistent boundaries. In other words, you can do better.* You can discipline in a way that's high on relationship, high on respect, and low on drama and conflict—and in the process, you can foster development that builds good relationship skills and improves your children's ability to make good decisions, think about others, and act in ways that prepare them for lifelong success and happiness.

We've talked to thousands and thousands of parents all over the world, teaching them basics about the brain and how it affects their relationship with their kids, and we've seen how hungry parents are to learn to address children's behavior in ways that are more respectful *and* more effective. Parents are tired of yelling so much, tired of seeing their kids get so upset, tired of their children continuing to misbehave. These parents know the kind of discipline they *don't* want to use, but they don't know *what to do* instead. They want to discipline in a kind and loving way, but they feel exhausted and overwhelmed when it comes to actually getting their kids to do what they're supposed to do. They want discipline that works and that they feel good about.

In this book, we'll introduce you to what we call a No-Drama, Whole-Brain approach to discipline, offering principles and strategies that will remove most of the drama and high emotions that so typically characterize discipline. As a result, your life as a parent will be easier and your parenting will become more effective. More important, you'll create connections in your children's brains that build emotional and social skills that will serve them now and throughout

What we hope you'll discover is that the moments when discipline is called for are actually some of the most important moments of parenting, times when we have the opportunity to shape our children most powerfully. When these challenges arise—and they will—you'll be able to look at them not merely as dreaded discipline situations full of anger and frustration and drama, but as opportunities to connect with your children and redirect them toward behavior that better serves them and your whole family.

If you are an educator, therapist, or coach who is also responsible for the growth and well-being of children, you will find that these techniques work just as well for your students, patients and clients, or teams. Recent discoveries about the brain give us deep insights into the children we care for, what they need, and how to discipline them in ways that foster optimal development. We've written this book for anyone who cares for a child and is interested in loving, scientifically informed, effective strategies to help children grow well. We'll use the word "parent" throughout the book, but if you're a grandparent, a teacher, or some other significant person in the life of a child, this book is also for you. Our lives are more meaningful with collaboration, and this joining together can begin with the many adults who cooperate in the nurturing of a child in the earliest days of life onward. We hope all children have many caregivers in their lives who are intentional about how they interact with them and, when necessary, discipline them in ways that build skills and enhance their relationship.

Reclaiming the Word "Discipline"

Let's begin with the actual goal of discipline. When your child misbehaves, what do you want to accomplish? Are consequences your ultimate goal? In other words, is the objective to punish?

Of course not. When we're angry, we may *feel* like we want to punish our child. Irritation, impatience, frustration, or just being unsure can make us feel that. It's totally understandable—even

of everyone's hair, we know that giving consequences is not our ultimate goal.

So what *do* we want? What is the goal of discipline?

Well, let's start with a formal definition. The word "discipline" comes directly from the Latin word *disciplina*, which was used as far back as the eleventh century to mean teaching, learning, and giving instruction. So, from its inception in the English language, "discipline" has meant "to teach."

These days, most people associate only punishment or consequences with the practice of discipline. It's like the mother with the eighteen-month-old son who asked Dan: "I'm doing a lot of teaching with Sam, but when do I start disciplining him?" The mother saw that she needed to address her son's behaviors, and she assumed that punishment is what discipline is meant to be.

As you read the rest of this book, we want you to keep in mind what Dan explained: that whenever we discipline our kids, our overall goal is not to punish or to give a consequence, but to teach. The root of "discipline" is the word *disciple*, which means "student," "pupil," and "learner." A disciple, the one receiving discipline, is not a prisoner or recipient of punishment, but one who is learning through instruction. Punishment might shut down a behavior in the short term, but teaching offers skills that last a lifetime.

We thought a lot about whether we even wanted to use the word "discipline" in our title. We weren't sure what to call this practice of setting limits while still being emotionally attuned to our children, this approach that centers on teaching and working with our kids to help them build the skills to make good choices. We decided that we want to reclaim the word "discipline," along with its original meaning. We want to completely reframe the whole discussion and differentiate *discipline* from *punishment*.

Essentially, we want caregivers to begin to think of discipline as one of the most loving and nurturing things we can do for kids. Our children need to learn skills like inhibiting impulses, managing big angry feelings, and considering the impact of their behavior on others.

and if you can provide it for them, you'll be offering a significant gift not only to your children, but to your whole family and even the rest of the world. Seriously. This is not mere hyperbole. No-Drama Discipline, as we'll describe it in the coming pages, will help your kids become the people they are meant to be, improving their ability to control themselves, respect others, participate in deep relationships, and live moral and ethical lives. Just think, then, about the generational impact that will have as they grow up with these gifts and abilities, and raise children of their own, who can then pass on these same gifts to future generations!

It begins with rethinking what discipline really means, reclaiming it as a term that's not about punishment or control, but about teaching and skill building—and doing so from a place of love, respect, and emotional connection.

The Dual Goals of No-Drama Discipline

Effective discipline aims for two primary goals. The first is obviously to get our kids to cooperate and do the right thing. In the heat of the moment, when our child is throwing a toy in a restaurant or being rude or refusing to do homework, we simply want her to act like she's supposed to. We want her to stop throwing the toy. We want her to communicate respectfully. We want her to get her homework done.

With a small child, achieving the first goal, cooperation, might involve getting him to hold your hand as he crosses the street, or helping him put down the bottle of olive oil he's swinging like a baseball bat in aisle 4 at the grocery store. For an older child it might mean problem-solving with him to do his chores in a more timely fashion, or discussing how his sister might feel about the phrase "fat-buttet lonely girl."

You'll hear us say it repeatedly throughout the book: every child is different, and no parenting approach or strategy will work every time. But the most obvious goal in all of these situations is to elicit cooperation and to help a child behave in ways that are acceptable (like using

iors that aren't (like hitting, or touching the gun someone left under the table at the library). This is the short-term goal of discipline.

For many people, that's the only goal: gaining immediate cooperation. They want their kids to stop doing something they shouldn't be doing or begin doing something they should be doing. That's why we so often hear parents use phrases like "Stop it *now*!" and the timeless "Because I said so!"

But really, we want more than mere cooperation, don't we? Of course we want to prevent the breakfast spoon from becoming a weapon. Of course we want to promote kind and respectful actions, and reduce the insults and belligerence.

But there's a second goal that's just as important, and whereas getting cooperation is the short-term objective, this second goal is more long-term. It focuses on instructing our children in ways that develop skills and the capacity to resiliently handle challenging situations, frustrations, and emotional storms that might make them lose control. These are the internal skills that can be generalized beyond the immediate behavior in the moment and then used not only now, but later in a variety of situations. This internal, second major goal of discipline is about helping them develop self-control and a moral compass, so that even when authority figures aren't around, they are thoughtful and conscientious. It's about helping them grow up and become kind and responsible people who can enjoy successful relationships and meaningful lives.

We call this a Whole-Brain approach to discipline because, as we'll explain, when we use the whole of our own brain as parents, we can focus on both the immediate external teachings and the long-term internal lessons. And when our children receive this form of intentional teaching, they, too, come to use their whole brains.

Over the generations, countless theories have cropped up about how to help our children "grow up right." There was the "spare the rod and spoil the child" school, and its opposite, the "free to be you and me" school. But in the last twenty years or so, during what's been called "the decade of the brain" and the years that have followed, sci-

the way the brain works, and it has plenty to tell us about loving, respectful, consistent, effective discipline.

We now know that the way to help a child develop optimally is to help create connections in her brain—her whole brain—that develop skills that lead to better relationships, better mental health, and more meaningful lives. You could call it brain sculpting, or brain nourishing, or brain building. Whatever phrase you prefer, the point is crucial, and thrilling: as a result of the words we use and the actions we take, children's brains will actually change, and be built, as they undergo new experiences.

Effective discipline means that we're not only stopping a bad behavior or promoting a good one, but also teaching skills and nurturing the connections in our children's brains that will help them make better decisions and handle themselves well in the future. Automatically. Because that's how their brains will have been wired. We're helping them understand what it means to manage their emotions, to control their own impulses, to consider others' feelings, to think about consequences, to make thoughtful decisions, and much more. We're helping them develop their brains and become people who are better friends, better siblings, better sons and daughters, and better human beings. Then, one day, better parents themselves.

As a huge bonus, the more we help build our kids' brains, the less we have to struggle to achieve the short-term goal of gaining cooperation. Encouraging cooperation *and* building the brain: these are the dual goals—the external and the internal—that guide a loving, effective, Whole-Brain approach to discipline. It's parenting with the brain in mind!

Accomplishing Our Goals: Saying No to the Behavior, but Yes to the Child

How do parents typically accomplish their discipline goals? Most commonly, through threats and punishment. Kids misbehave, and the immediate parental reaction is to offer consequences with both