

Parenting with Influence, Not Control

One morning, a farmer was doing chores in front of his farmhouse when a large four-wheel drive pulled into his driveway. A man in a uniform climbed out, walked up to the farmer, and declared, “I’m here to inspect your farm for any illegally grown drugs.”

The farmer responded, “Fine. But whatever you do, do not go into that paddock over there.” He pointed to a beautiful paddock behind the man.

The officer, bristling with authority, replied, “Mate, I don’t think you understand. I’m here to inspect your farm and I have the authority of the state government – the premier – behind me.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a badge. “Do you see this badge? It means I can go onto any land I want! Have I made myself clear?”

The farmer apologised and resumed his chores. A short while later, the farmer heard a scream. He looked toward the paddock and saw the officer racing across it with a raging bull in hot pursuit.

Seeing the imminent danger, the farmer stepped onto the fence surrounding the paddock and called out, “Your badge! Show him your badge!”

The Badge of Authority

As parents, we often find ourselves in the same predicament as the officer. We believe that our authority should compel our children to comply, but just like the bull, they are unimpressed by our badges. We say things like, “Because I’m the parent, that’s why,” and expect obedience. When our children resist, we escalate, relying on our power to enforce compliance.

But this approach is flawed. H.L. Mencken said, “There’s always a well-known solution to every human problem – neat, plausible, and wrong.” This is especially true in parenting. Our simplistic strategies for “fixing” our children often create bigger challenges. Children need to know we have power, but that power should make them feel secure, not controlled.

When our children don’t listen, we get mad. We yell, threaten, remove privileges, ground, and some parents even resort to physical punishment. But these actions ignore the reasons behind their behaviour and damage our relationship with them. They might

comply in the short term, but they're learning to fear us, not to understand right from wrong.

Relying on our authority, our parenting “badge,” diminishes our real influence. Children might obey while we're watching, but the moment we turn our backs, our authority evaporates. Instead, we need to focus on building relationships of trust. This slow, deliberate approach might seem less effective at first, but it yields long-term results.

The Three Es of Effective Discipline

If we really want to *help* our children, we do it best by *working with them* rather than *doing things to them* or simply issuing commands. To help, I've developed the 3 Es of Effective Discipline: Explore, Explain, and Empower.

When we **explore**, we spend time together, connecting. When we understand where our child is struggling, we move to explain.

When we **explain**, we keep it short and simple. Most of the time our children already know what is expected. So we restate, “You know, and I know, that hitting your siblings is not ok. We're always working on managing our feelings and asking for help if we need it.”

Then, assuming they feel understood and we know they get our expectations loud and clear, we **empower**. This does not mean we let them decide what should happen. It means we invite their ideas on how to move forward, and offer gentle collaboration and guidance to help them figure things out. It might mean they apologise to someone who's been hurt, make restitution for something lost, broken, or stolen, or simply promise to do better next time.

Power struggles are an inevitable part of parenting. Toddlers fight over bedtime, screen time, or what to wear. Teenagers push back against curfews and household rules.

Parenting with influence, not control, requires patience, empathy, and a willingness to understand our children's perspectives. By setting aside our badges of authority and embracing the Three Es of Effective Discipline, we can navigate the challenges of parenthood with grace and effectiveness, fostering a nurturing environment where our children can thrive.



AUTHOR

Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.

