

Compliance vs. Obedience: A Subtle but Important Distinction for Effective Parenting

As I have worked with parents over the years, one of the lessons that I have tried to share with my clients is the subtle but important distinction between compliance and obedience. On the surface it may sound like it is only a semantic difference, but I assure you the difference is very deep and profound. Because it is not an obvious distinction, I have found that it is one of those areas where many parents struggle and thus serves as a valuable insight to share with parents.

To illustrate how this often occurs, I'll start from the beginning.

When I initially ask parents what they want help with, they typically express their concerns in terms of some sort of behavior that their child is exhibiting; it has been as small as the child rolling their eyes and as large as the child perpetrating theft or assault. But regardless of the relative intensity of the offensive behavior, the primary desire of virtually every parent is for their child's behavior to improve as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, their desire for speedy change is rarely realistic. Anyone who has ever tried to kick an old habit knows "quick" is not really how lasting behavioral change works. It is a long-term process, one that requires perseverance and persistence. And it is only logical that this is exactly the manner in which most kids will hang on to their old negative behavioral habits - with perseverance and persistence. This can be hard to understand at times. We might look at our kids and think to ourselves, "What's the deal, kid? Do you *like* being in trouble? What purpose does this negative behavior serve? Why not just fall in line? Why all the drama?"

This speaks directly to my concern about many parents not getting the distinction between compliance and obedience. The reality is that just like adults, children make their own choices about how they are going to behave. Discipline, structure, rewards, and so on can all influence a child - sometimes quite effectively - but they can't truly control a child. But in the day-to-day world of parenting, control of their child's behavior is usually exactly what a parent is trying to do, because of their desire for quick improvement.

Most of the time I get scoffs from parents when I first suggest that they are seeking to control their child. They respond with something like "I'm not trying to control him, I just need him to do what I say when I say it." (Interestingly

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enough, most of them do not initially catch the inherent contradiction of this type of statement.) At this point I try to take the discussion deeper, so I ask them a question along these lines: “Except for when their safety or someone else’s is at risk, why exactly do you need them to do what you say when you say it?” I’m not advocating for negative behavior in children, I simply have found that there are indeed a number of possible reasons why a parent would try to control a child, and it is important to get to those deeper reasons. And indeed, the answers I have received in the past are enlightening. Consider the following examples:

- “Have you ever been in a grocery store with a child throwing a tantrum? It’s humiliating.”
- “I am so sick of the judging looks of other parents. I just want a normal kid.”
- “What am I supposed to do? Just let them run amuck?”
- “You need to show them who’s boss or they’ll walk all over you.”
- “If I don’t control them, who will? They clearly can’t control themselves.”

Essentially, these parents had decided that their children needed to be “reigned in” and kept “in line.” And in cases where the child is doing something dangerous, of course we have to intervene. However, the vast majority of the time I have found that the child’s behavior is not dangerous per se...but it can be very annoying, frustrating, embarrassing, and so on. So this begs the question again - why do they “need” to be controlled? The answers that most parents give me - like the ones listed above - demonstrate that we often are seeking to control our children for our own personal reasons. We want to avoid embarrassment. We want to present ourselves to others as “good parents.” We want to avoid inconvenience. We are tired or in a bad mood and simply don’t feel like being bothered. The list goes on.

Now, please understand that there is nothing wrong with wanting to avoid embarrassment, or wanting to be seen as good parents, and so on. That’s perfectly natural and acceptable. And all of us must give ourselves permission to be in a bad mood from time to time. The point is that we so often allow these underlying personal needs and desires to be the main or even sole influence over our decisions and thinking regarding how we interact with our children. When this happens we end up placing the externally observable behavior of the child above virtually all else for our own gain; our goal will be for them to behave within the bounds we have set, and we will do whatever we can to make that happen. When we reach this point, we have set up a game of cat and mouse, where the child’s motivation is to simply stay out of trouble and to seek as much freedom as they can within the bounds that have been set for them. It is a constant battle of wills and of testing of boundaries. And when the child does in

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fact stay within those bounds, they are being compliant and we feel like we have accomplished our goal.

What I have found is that over time, this type of disciplinary strategy is fundamentally doomed to failure. The fact that the behavior is “in bounds” is not always the best sign of success. It is usually a short-term gain, but a long-term loss. The reality is that this situation is one of compliance, not obedience. Compliance is a state of affairs in which a child is doing what they feel they “have” to do, not what they choose to do. They feel forced to behave in a certain way, and decide to do what they have to do to get by. It is a strategic decision on their part, not a moral or ethical one. But the fundamental problem is that this type of discipline basically leaves the child with only two choices as they perceive it: comply or be punished.

Interestingly, most parents initially see nothing wrong with that idea. They tell me “Yeah, if the kid defies me, I’m going to punish them. Isn’t that what good parenting is all about?” It sounds pretty solid at first, but they are missing the point. The fact is that punishment is an after the fact attempt at discipline. It is based on the theory that “If I make the punishment harsh enough, they won’t do it the next time.” That idea is just plain false in my experience. Because if we keep using this general approach in the long term, we will find that the older our children get the better they get at finding ways around our so-called discipline. They will give token compliance to us when we are around but will find every loophole and weakness in our defenses and will learn how to still carry out their desired behaviors when our backs are turned. It will turn us into nervous wrecks, wondering what our kid will be doing next, and we will wonder where we went wrong.

Most parents at this point ask me what the alternative is, often with some level of exasperation. It sounds so simple, but it’s true: Seek obedience, not compliance. Don’t try to force your child to behave in a certain way, instead seek to teach them to make decisions from within that are correct and appropriate; instead of teaching them to “do what I say when I say it,” teach them to do the right things that they have been taught on their own for their own good.

If you think I am splitting hairs, I assure you I am not. These are qualitatively different approaches. Consider these examples:

- Compliance-centered parents say “do it or else.” Obedience-centered parents ask their child what they think the right choice is and coach rather than command.

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- Compliance-centered parents look for ways their children have defied them and punish accordingly. Obedience-centered parents look for ways their children have done the right thing and reward accordingly.
- Compliance-centered parents define success as a child who behaves the right way. Obedience-centered parents define success as a child who chooses the right way.
- Compliance-centered parents are worried about what others will think of them as parents if the child acts out. Obedience-centered parents are concerned of what the child must be thinking of himself if he acts out.

The bottom line here is that compliance is about restricting the number of choices children have in an attempt to ensure a certain type of behavior, while obedience is about showing children the right path and allowing them the room to choose it - even allowing some poor choices to be made. This may sound irresponsible, but there is no way to teach making good choices if there is no real choice being offered. It may sound radical, but it's not as long as we do set some boundaries that keep children safe. Our children must be allowed to learn right and wrong, and if wrong is never allowed as an option, how will they know right when they see it? It takes a parent with a long-term vision of their role to get this point. As long as you are willing to accept some short-term setbacks, you will see the long-term value of learning from one's own choices.

I'll summarize my argument here with a simple question that I have asked many parents: Would you rather have your child learn to listen to their parents, or learn to listen to their conscience?

I know what I'm shooting for.

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