

# THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

## Introduction

The Expiatory Cycle is the original idea of my friend and colleague, Bob Smith. It is a simple model intended to help parents recognize the profound importance of discipline. The Expiatory Cycle deals not only with the role of discipline in regulating and shaping your child's behavior; but also, its impact on guilt, shame, forgiveness, reconciliation, conscience, and even self-esteem and confidence. Perhaps most importantly, The Expiatory Cycle provides a framework for strengthening the parent-child relationship. Since we consider the parent-child relationship to be the foundation for future relationships, we consider discipline to be the cornerstone of effective parenting.

## Guilt and Forgiveness

Our struggle with guilt is probably as old as mankind. Our need to expiate guilt is as old as our oldest religions. To expiate means to atone, make amends, or pay a penalty for; to relieve, or cleanse of guilt for some wrong behavior or misdeed that has caused it.

Organized traditions for expiating guilt, such as religion and law, have similar elements. First, the offender must feel a true sense of remorse or regret. Second, they must stop the misdeed immediately and resolve not to do it again. Third, they must feel the need and ask for forgiveness. Finally, they must make up for their misdeed by making amends or paying a penalty for their wrong behavior.

We have evidence of ancient animal, and even human, sacrifices made to placate the gods and to expiate the sins of the people. In Judaism, forgiveness is viewed as a process that involves introspection, repentance, and reconciliation. Jews believe in the importance of seeking forgiveness from both God and fellow human beings. The annual observance of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a significant time for repentance and seeking forgiveness. Muslims are encouraged to seek forgiveness from Allah by acknowledging their sins, sincerely repenting, and seeking His mercy. They believe that Allah is the most forgiving and merciful, and forgiveness can be attained through sincere efforts to rectify

## THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

one's behavior. Hindus believe in the concept of karma, which emphasizes the consequences of one's actions. Through sincere remorse, repentance, and making amends, individuals can seek forgiveness from the divine and aim to purify their karma. Buddhism teaches that forgiveness plays a vital role in achieving inner peace and liberation from suffering. Buddhists believe that forgiveness is a means to let go of anger, resentment, and attachments that cause suffering. The process of forgiveness involves recognizing the impermanent and interconnected nature of all things and developing compassion towards oneself and others. Christians are encouraged to confess their sins, repent, and seek forgiveness from God. In turn, Christians are also called to forgive others as Jesus forgave them. The traditional purpose of sanctions in criminal law was, among other things, to expiate the offender's moral guilt. Punishment was meted out in proportion to the guilt of the accused. Psychotherapy is thought of by some as a secular means of expiating guilt. The effective expiation of guilt has occupied a central place in our most important social institutions for centuries.

### Importance of Discipline

Effective parental discipline serves a similar, expiatory purpose in a child's life. Thoughtful discipline helps the child learn behavioral and social skills necessary for successful interpersonal relationships. Discipline is vital to the development of a healthy conscience, how we deal with personal feelings of guilt and shame, regulation of our behavior and emotions, and self-concept.

Thoughtfully and consistently administered, discipline establishes the parent as a potent reinforcer in the child's life. Thoughtful discipline helps the child to manage their anxiety by demonstrating that their parents are fair and competent and that they will care for and protect them (provide safe boundaries). When the child is persuaded, by way of testing, that their parents are in control, they are assured that their parents will love and protect them, and that they are a valued part of their lives. In a word, they feel safe. They are free to progress more completely through their normal developmental stages at their own pace.

## THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

After several repetitions, the child integrates The Expiatory Cycle and it becomes a model for their own internal parent, or conscience. By reinforcing the parents' rules, values, and behavioral expectations The Expiatory Cycle serves to transmit the culture of the family to the child and provides them with an important sense of belonging and identity.

### Managing Behavior

The following "Do's and Don'ts" provide some useful guidelines for managing children's behavior.

#### **DO'S**

Do childproof the home.

Do try to understand the context of the child's behavior so that curiosity and other non-defiant behaviors are not punished.

Do develop a reward system for behaviors you want to see more of; reward is a much more powerful motivator than punishment.

Do identify your noise tolerance level and inform the children when the noise has exceeded it. Don't discipline them for that problem unless they continue to exceed your tolerance level.

Do set limits i.e., inform them as well as you can about your expectations so that everyone clearly understands infractions when they occur.

Do establish simple, clear, and consistent behavioral expectations e.g., treat others with respect and live up to your agreements.

#### **DON'TS**

Don't punish physically.

Don't humiliate or shame.

Don't punish publicly.

Don't discipline excessively, or for excessive periods of time.

Don't punish a group for the misbehavior of one or two members.

Don't withhold special privileges e.g., trips, birthday parties, etc.

### Guilt Versus Shame

Guilt has a bad reputation. Besides the fact that it makes us feel bad, we do not properly differentiate between guilt and its more insidious cousin, shame. It has been said that the

## THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

difference between guilt and shame is the difference between thinking, "I made a mistake," and "I am a mistake." Guilt can be a useful, even desirable, emotional response to a misdeed. Proper discipline recognizes and uses guilt constructively to shape behavior without invoking shame.

First, to be a useful and healthy behavioral teaching tool, the degree of guilt experienced by the child must be commensurate with the misdeed. The corresponding discipline should be neither too permissive nor too punitive. Second, there must be a reasonable means of expiating, or relieving, the child's guilt. Third, after the behavior has been corrected or disciplined, remorse has been genuinely expressed, and the related lesson has been taught and learned; the individual is forgiven by and reconciled with the parent/significant authority. Their guilt is expiated, and the incident is over.

Guilt becomes a problem when it is not properly expiated. For our purposes, we will define shame as an accumulation of unexpiated guilt. As unexpiated guilt accumulates, it turns to shame which is a painful, disgraceful, and humiliating feeling. Children, as well as adults, express shame in a variety of maladaptive ways; acting out, interpersonal and relationship problems, emotional disorders, and even some physical ailments. Our secular society affords few tools by which to effectively manage guilt and, therefore, shame. The Expiatory Cycle can be a useful tool for this purpose.

### How the Cycle Works

Children are strongly motivated to seek a secure, loved state in relation to their parents. From infancy, we seek to please our parents to ensure our survival. Their parents' attention is the primary reinforcer for children and, as such, the judicious use of parental attention can be very effective in shaping children's behavior. In general, it is sufficient for parents to pay attention to behavior they want to increase and ignore behavior they want to decrease.

## THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

Occasionally, though, children will commit misdeeds that cannot be ignored and require correction or discipline. These misdeeds are different from honest mistakes or mistakes made from curiosity. Misdeeds that require discipline are "tinged with defiance," and it is important to know the difference. Honest mistakes or mistakes made from curiosity should be corrected and used as opportunities to teach the child, but they should not be disciplined.

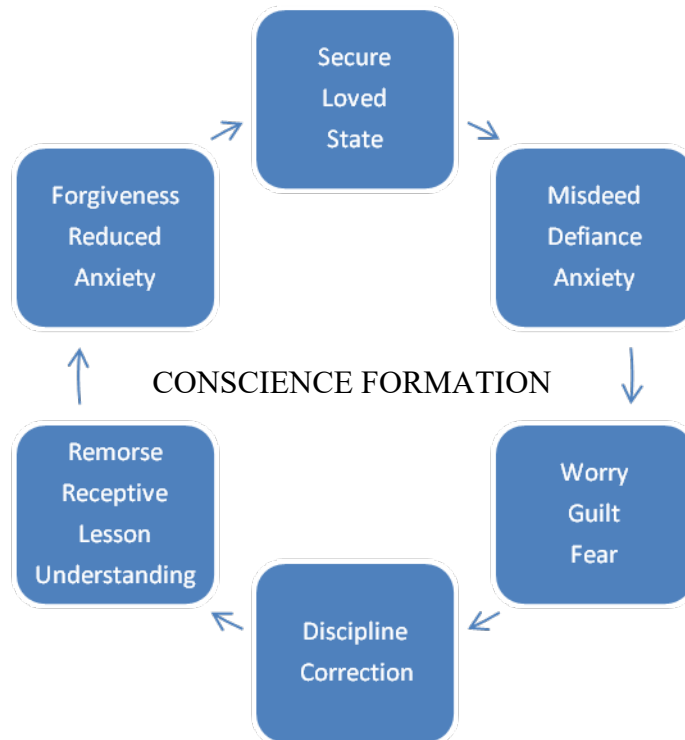
Misdeeds "tinged with defiance" are very different kinds of misdeeds and, by virtue of their defiant nature, may be thought of as small crisis points in the relationship between parent and child. Defiance is an important expression of the child's emerging ego strength. It is an important test of the parent's ability to enforce reasonable boundaries and still respect the child's developing sense of self. The parent-child relationship will turn on how the parent responds to this test.

If the parent cannot ignore the child's misdeed, all regular activity must stop. For some parents, this is the hardest part of the cycle and where the effectiveness of their discipline can break down. All parents are busy. It is rarely convenient to stop everything and focus your attention exclusively on the child, yet that is what we must do to communicate the seriousness of the misdeed. Correction or discipline is applied at this point. It is helpful to understand the series of emotional states children go through during the process of misbehavior and discipline. We have diagrammed this series of emotional states in The Expiatory Cycle below.

# THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

## EXPIATORY CYCLE



We make a distinction between discipline and punishment. Punishment may work, i.e., it may stop the behavior, but it is negative in the sense that it does nothing for the child's spirit and is harmful to the parent-child relationship. Discipline is positive, compassionate, and instructive. Children ordinarily appreciate discipline when it is done in a caring way. It can even be done in a polite way, especially after a pattern has been established. Such thoughtful discipline strengthens the parent-child relationship.

The correction or discipline phase, e.g., timeout, loss of privilege, continues until the child expresses sincere remorse. There is a difference between sincere and fake remorse that parents must learn to recognize. Fake remorse is usually easily spotted and may require further discipline. In any event, it should not be rewarded. Sincere remorse typically includes an element of submission or surrender to the parent/significant authority along with a yearning for forgiveness.

## THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

When the child expresses sincere remorse, the parent has successfully helped them to process their initial feelings of defiance (a hallmark of misdeeds) through feelings of apprehension, worry, anxiety (as the consequences of their behavior start to become apparent), fear, and ultimately remorse, understanding, receptiveness, and relief. At this point (remorse) the parent has a small window of opportunity in which to teach a lesson, e.g., do you know why what you did was wrong?

The lesson precedes forgiveness and the accompanying feeling of relief. It is instructive and compassionate and, in the context of the child's sincere remorse and yearning for forgiveness, they can often recognize its usefulness for future behavioral reference. For younger children, apology letters are often useful here e.g., "I'm sorry I teased your cat," or "I'm sorry I smashed your pumpkin," etc.

After remorse is expressed and the lesson is learned, the parent must unambiguously communicate forgiveness and the readmission of the child into their secure, loved state. This is a signal to the child that they have atoned, they are reconciled with the parent and that the incident has ended. The episode affords no further opportunity for influence or change. Life can return to normal.

Ideally, The Expiatory Cycle should be gone through in a matter of minutes up to a half hour, or so. A few minutes' talk with a child during the remorse phase is worth 10 times that amount of lecturing in the defiant, misdeed phase. Lecturing can actually be a type of reward or attention-getting that will tend to reinforce or encourage misbehavior and undermine the potency of the parents' relationship with the child. Discipline should be administered promptly, and with as few words as possible. Talking should be reserved for when the child's mood or mental state is more receptive to teaching and problem solving.

Used consistently and thoughtfully, The Expiatory Cycle establishes the parent as a strong and compassionate influence in the child's life. It communicates to the child that their parents are in charge and that they are being taught, guided, protected, and loved. In

## THE EXPIATORY CYCLE - A Guide for Thoughtful Discipline

Robert V. Smith, MD, and Jack D. Love, LMFT

short, they are safe to be a child, to grow and develop into healthy and unique human beings.

Each time the child experiences the effective expiation of guilt and the resulting reduction of anxiety, positive effect on self-esteem, and strengthened parent-child relationship, the model is reinforced. Over time, The Expiatory Cycle helps establish and reinforce the development of a healthy conscience as the child internalizes the model and makes it their own. Eventually, conscience itself begins to oversee the cycle. As the child grows and matures, the model provides them with important tools they can use to regulate their own behavior and emotions, and a means by which to forgive themselves their own misdeeds as well as those of others. And, of course, it provides a model for raising their own children in the future.