

Police minister Bheki Cele recently urged parents not to blame the police when teenagers kill. With that, he encouraged them to rather look closely at what they are imparting to their children in the way they discipline them. So, what role do parents play in shaping who kids become?

There are many external factors that may influence a child's behaviour, and there may be justification in shifting the blame to schools, the community or the violent society we live in. However, Kim Abrahams, a Cape Town-based child and family therapist, says that minors learn to behave by observing and being exposed to the behaviour of their primary caregivers.

"Children ultimately learn what they live. So it remains the main responsibility of parents to ensure they expose them to appropriate and consistent discipline, and by being mindful of their own actions. Morals, values and expectations that are instilled at home. If parents are not actively involved, then the child will learn from others around them, which may not always be in their best interest," Abrahams says.

WHAT IS DISCIPLINE?

Mahlatse Diale, a social worker from the Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre (JPCCC), says it is very important to first understand what 'discipline' really means.

"The word signifies teaching and a



lot is written on that. Discipline is not about acting after a child has done something wrong. It's proactive, and involves you teaching a child what's expected of them, why, and what the consequences are. It's about teaching what acceptable and unacceptable behaviours are," Diale explains.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS

One of the biggest challenges adults face is being constantly mindful of their actions when correcting their child. This involves considering the emotional needs of the youngster and checking your own emotions and behaviour, experts say.

Love and care need to be the main drivers of discipline, says Lwanele Khasu, a clinical psychologist. "It's important to take control of your own emotions before addressing the child's actions. This is why we always emphasise that you act when you're calm, not when you're angry, because you may act too harshly," Khasu says.

"Children, with the help of their parents or guardians, need to make sense of what they've done wrong and what they can do differently, with the adults teaching and modelling the correct behaviour to them," she explains.

Diale adds that it's also vital to understand the child's emotion regarding their displayed behaviour. "This involves communication between the two. Shouting and giving a hiding won't resolve the issue," Diale explains.

THEN AND NOW

Corporal punishment in the home has been a criminal act in South Africa for some time now. This, Diale believes, is at the heart of what many parents struggle with.

"Some might be very happy because they hated how they were beaten, if it bordered on abusive and corrective. But others might be struggling because, in the absence of corporal punishment, they weren't given an alternative and don't know what else to do," Diale says.

In overcompensating for what we thought was unfair in our own upbringing, some tend to let youngsters have their way.

"Parents have been heavily criticised for allowing their children to have a greater sense of authority in terms of how they themselves choose to be disciplined," Abrahams shares.

"We need to be mindful that discipline is not only related to physical chastisement, but also linked to a lack of limits within the family and home environment. Setting appropriate and consistent boundaries for your child

is vital, if we are to raise law-abiding individuals who are able to empathise," she adds.

Cutting and pasting disciplinary methods we don't understand is another mistake parents and caregivers make, as Khasu points out.

"If you ask parents who make use of the 'naughty corner' or the confiscation of gadgets and devices, how that helps the child, many of them don't know. Different actions call for different discipline. We need to understand the philosophies behind the methods we use and understand what the outcomes are. 'One size fits all' doesn't apply," Khasu says. In other words, know why you'd use a particular technique and what change you expect to see.

It's also important for parents to be empowered, Diale says. "They need to attend courses and learn about positive parenting, and maybe go for counselling to attend to issues that they themselves have grown up with. Organisations like the JPCCC are available to help," Diale concludes. ■

EXPERT TIPS ON HOW TO DISCIPLINE FROM A PLACE OF LOVE

Be calm, first, so you can act positively. Talk and communicate with your kids. Make them understand what it is that they have done wrong. The more you speak to your kids, the more of your ideas and your thoughts they get in.

Give them options, outline the limits clearly. As they grow older, you can then teach them how to negotiate boundaries respectfully.

Point at what they did, and never attack their character. This way, children get to understand that it's their behaviour and actions that are problematic, and not them.

Consistency is key. This will help reaffirm everything that you have taught them so far, and not send any mixed messages.

Diale and Abrahams explain how discipline can destroy if implemented incorrectly:

Violence, even with reason, can destroy. If you beat with the aim of hurting your children, you shame and take away their power. In the same breath, you teach them that someone can take away their power. When they feel powerless, they will assume that, they too, have the right to take away someone else's by using violence.

Words have the capacity to build or break. Calling your child names takes away their true identity and they grow attached to the identity you've given them. This constitutes abuse.

Not allowing for mistakes. Avoid having your child feel like they can't make any errors. There's a fine balance between over-correcting and allowing your child to make blunders so they can learn the lesson.

Bad intentions. Are you trying to instill fear in your children or make them upstanding members of the community? A parent who is feared is deemed unapproachable. Don't be surprised if your child takes more risks without coming to talk to you about it.

Are We Raising Young Monsters?

The recent spate of teenage killers is a disturbing sign of something that has broken down in society. Who needs to take responsibility?

By **KGOMOTSO MONCHO - MARIPANE**