

August, 2008 Draft  
Under review by publisher

**ELEMENTS OF DISCIPLINE:  
NINE PRINCIPLES FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS**

**Stephen Greenspan, PhD**

EXCERPT FOR WEBSITE

## **Table of Contents**

**FOREWARD--Arnold J. Sameroff**

**Section One—Presenting the ABC Theory of Discipline**

**Chapter 1— Discipline Domains, Child Outcomes, Discipline Models**

**Chapter 2--How the ABC Theory Links Domains, Outcomes and Models**

**Section Two—Elaborating on the Three Underlying Models**

**Chapter 3—The three principles in the Affective model**

**Chapter 4—The three principles in the Behavioral model**

**Chapter 5—The three principles in the Cognitive model**

**Section Three—Putting the Models into Practice**

**Chapter 6—How the Affective Model Addresses Three Cases**

**Chapter 7— How the Behavioral Model Addresses Three Cases**

**Chapter 8— How the Cognitive Model Addresses Three Cases**

**Section Four—Putting the Theory into Practice**

**Chapter 9— Use of the Theory to Guide to Dealing with “Micro” Situations**

**Chapter 10—Use of the Theory to Better Understand Discipline Authors**

**Chapter 11—Use of the Theory to Refine One’s Discipline Style**

**References**

**Appendix A—Glossary of Terms**

**Appendix B--Annotated Bibliography of Parent Discipline**

**Appendix C—Annotated bibliography of Teacher Discipline**

## **Chapter Two—How the ABC Theory Links Domains, Outcomes and Models**

### **The Nine Elements in the ABC Theory**

**In this chapter I lay out the basic elements of what I term the ABC Theory of Discipline. The central idea in this book is that there are three major theoretical frameworks guiding authors who write books about discipline. I term these frameworks “Affective,” “Behavioral” and “Cognitive” (hence the acronym “ABC”). These frameworks are described fully in chapters three through five. Most discipline books fall clearly into one of these frameworks, although the authors do not always make their theoretical underpinnings clear. I believe that each of these three models can be understood to consist of three core elements, or principles, and that these principles serve to help a caregiver to become competent in each of three key domains of discipline, which I term “Warmth”, “Tolerance” and “Influence.” A secondary way of understanding these core principles, is in terms of three desired child social competence outcomes, which I term “Happiness”, “Boldness” and “Niceness.”**

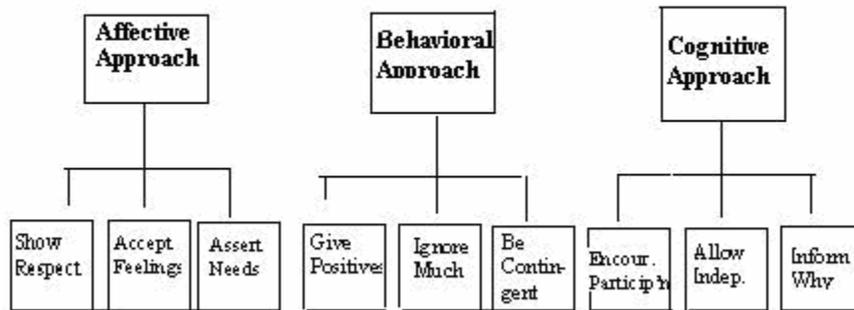
**The nine principles in the ABC Theory are portrayed below, in Figure 1, grouped under the three major discipline models. In later figures, the elements will be grouped in various other ways, intended to help the reader to fully understand the connection between the elements and the major domains of discipline and of social competence.**

### **The Three Affective Principles**

**As depicted in Figure 1, the three Affective principles are: “Show respect,” “accept feelings” and “assert needs.” These are all intended to help caregivers to become more sensitive to the emotional tone of the child-caregiver relationship.**

.....

**FIGURE 4--Principles in Each of the Three Discipline Approaches**



.....

The “show respect” principle can be stated as: “When setting a limit, caregivers should avoid commenting on a child’s motives, intentions or overall patterns of behavior.” In other words, focus on the specific behavior that is a problem for you and do not tear down or denigrate the child.

The “accept feelings” principle can be stated as “caregivers should provide symbolic outlets for the child’s expression of feelings, even when setting a limit on an overt behavior stemming from that feeling.” In other words, a child’s behavior may or may not be a problem, but feelings themselves are never a problem.

The “assert needs” principle can be stated as: “Caregivers have a right and a responsibility to set a limit whenever a child does something, dangerous, destructive or that violates the caregiver’s standards of acceptability.” In other words, the concept of respect is a two-way street, and involves not only respecting a child’s feelings and needs, but insisting that a child do likewise towards the caregiver.

**The Three Behavioral Principles**

As depicted in Figure 1, the three Behavioral principles are: “Give positives”, “ignore much” and “be contingent.” These are all intended to help caregivers to become

more skilled in responding to various classes of child behaviors. The “give positives” principle can be stated as: “In any large time unit (such as a day), a caregiver should do a lot more praising than punishing,” with “a lot” meaning a ratio of at least five praises (positive utterances or gestures) for each punishment (negative utterances or gestures). A healthy and effective caregiver-child relationship is one in which the atmosphere is decidedly positive.

The “ignore much” principle can be stated as: “In any large time unit (such as a day), a caregiver should do a lot more ignoring than punishing.” In other words, a caregiver should ignore things that she does not like but can live with and should only punish that relatively small class of behaviors which she does not like and cannot live with.

The “be contingent” principle can be stated as: “A caregiver should be careful not to praise a behavior that she doesn’t like (whether or not it is something she can live with) and would like to see less of, and should be careful not to punish a behavior that she likes and would like to see more of. The idea here is not to be “consistent”, because caregivers can ignore some disliked behaviors and is not obligated to praise every desirable behavior every time it occurs (this is a major misunderstanding of many caregivers, who mistakenly think they are supposed to become “perpetual praising machines”). Rather, the important thing is to be aware of whether a child behavior falls in a desirable or undesirable category, and avoid crossing categories with their one’s responses.

### **The Three Cognitive Principles**

As depicted in Figure 1, the three Cognitive principles are: “encourage participation,” “allow independence” and “say why.” These are all intended to avoid top-

down power struggles and help a child to take responsibility for his own moral development.

The “encourage participation” principle can be stated as: “Children should be allowed to participate in the setting and enforcement of rules.” This is typically done through democratic arrangements such as family or class “councils,” as well as such techniques as “encouragement.”

The “allow independence” principle can be stated as: “Children should be enabled to pursue and express their own individual life style preferences.” This is done through avoidance of getting sucked into triangulation games (such as tattling) and an effort to treat each child as an individual.

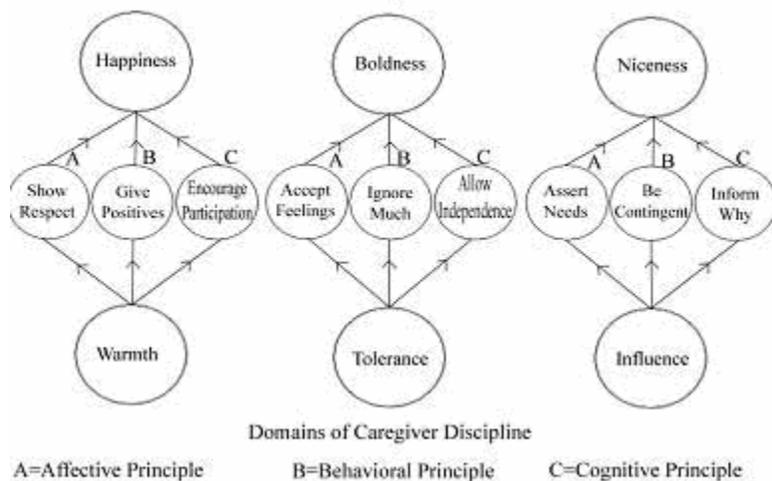
The “say why” principle can be stated as: “Caregivers should make an effort to help a child to understand the reason for rules and punishments.” This is done through such techniques as logical or natural consequences (in which the punishment is chosen because of its educational message) rather than through lectures.

**Integrating the Three Approaches Hierarchically**

The essence of the ABC Theory is to show the complementarity of the Affective, Behavioral and Cognitive approaches by integrating the nine principles (three from each approach) hierarchically. This is done by showing how each approach has one principle that helps a caregiver to be competent in one of three domains of discipline—“Warmth,” “Tolerance” and “Influence.” In addition, these principles can be linked to three child social competence outcomes: “Happiness,” “Boldness” and “Niceness.” The resulting integration, depicted in Figure 2, comprises the ABC theory.

.....

Figure 5 --The ABC Theory of Discipline  
Desired Social Competence Outcomes



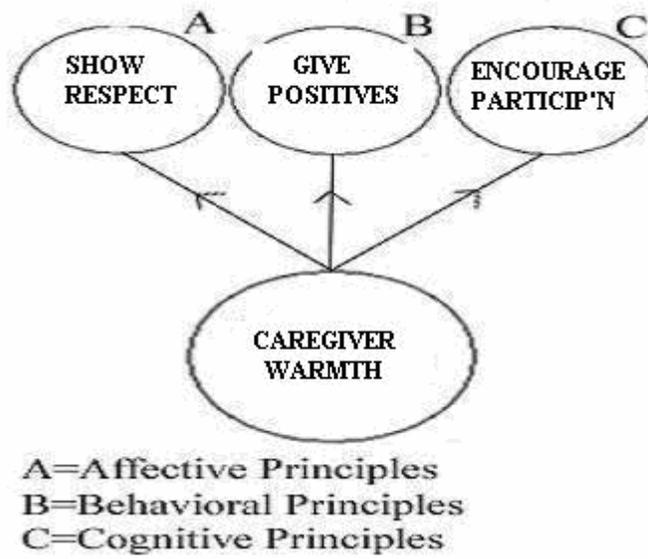
.....

The three domains of discipline that are used as the basis of the theory emerged from research studies, in which large numbers of caregivers were rated on a number of items, and statistical methods were used to group the items into a small number of factors. Three factors, or “domains” of discipline have been identified: “warmth”, “tolerance” and “influence” (sometimes termed “control.”)

Warmth. The warmth domain refers to the extent to which a caregiver creates an atmosphere for children that can be described as loving, friendly and approving. It is my assertion that each of the three discipline approaches helps a caregiver to be high on warmth through one of its principles. This connection between warmth and the three principles is portrayed in Figure 6.

.....

**FIGURE 6 -- Principles Associated With the Warmth Domain**



.....

The warmth domain is portrayed on the bottom of the figure with arrows radiating upward to the three principles (one from each of the three approaches) above it. The arrows are intended to suggest that the three principles are direct outgrowths of a caregiver's attempt to be high on the warmth domain.

The connection between the Affective "show respect" principle and the discipline domain of warmth has less to do with encouraging caregivers to be warm than it has to do with discouraging them from being cold or hostile. A setting in which caregivers very rarely make sarcastic, disparaging or rejecting comments may or may not score high on the warmth domain but is very unlikely to score low on it. Thus, the first Affective principle does, I believe, contribute to the goal of helping caregivers to be competent in the warmth domain.

The connection between the Behavioral "Give Positives" principle and the discipline domain of warmth flows from the fact that a setting in which caregivers give lots of praise and positive reinforcement, and in which the ratio of praise to punishment is very high (as

many as five or more praises to every punishing comment or act) is nothing if not warm. While behaviorists conceptualize reinforcement in terms of its role in modifying child behavior, there is no question but that caregivers who follow the behaviorist prescription for discipline are likely to come across as very warm and loving.

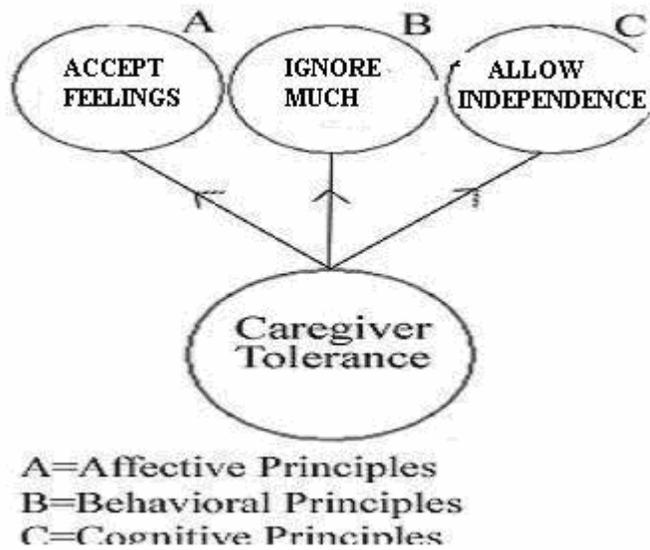
The connection between the Cognitive principle “encourage participation” and warmth is a little less obvious, but I believe it is possible to make this connection. When a caregiver allows a child to participate as an equal in discussing, devising and implementing the rules that govern a family or classroom setting, that caregiver is telling the child “I respect you and value your views on all matters.” Such a stance is a hallmark, I believe, of caregiver warmth. A more obvious connection to warmth can be found in the major emphasis in the Cognitive approach on the use of encouragement as a general and frequent form of communication with children.

Encouragement may be seen as a particular (and very careful) type of praising that imparts to children the notion that they can change, while leaving the motivation to change in the child’s own hands. Encouragement is a warm form of caregiver interaction in that it is very empowering and affirmative, in contrast to punishment, which Cognitive theorists see as discouraging and undermining of the child’s own intrinsic motivation.

Tolerance. The tolerance domain refers to the extent to which a caregiver makes an effort to respect the autonomy of children, and to give them room for expression, exploration and freedom from excessive adult intrusiveness. It is my assertion that each of the three discipline approaches helps a caregiver to do this through one of its principles (this is portrayed in Figure 7 below.)

.....

**FIGURE 7 -Principles Associated With the Tolerance Domain**



.....

The connection between the Affective “accept feelings” principle and the discipline domain of tolerance is fairly obvious. When a caregiver accepts an expression of feelings by a child, especially when the feeling is one that the caregiver may not share (or particularly welcome), she is communicating to the child that he is entitled to have an internal life that is his own. It is a way of saying to the child: “I am me and you are you, and you do not require my permission to have your own thoughts, feelings and values.” This may not cover the entire spectrum of tolerance, but it certainly goes a long way towards establishing a setting (home, classroom, etc.) as one in which tolerance is practiced.

The connection between the Behavioral “ignore much” principle and the discipline domain of tolerance is also obvious. A caregiver who does a great deal of ignoring, and who chooses not to comment on or punish actions or verbalizations that she may not like but can live with, is a caregiver who comes across as quite tolerant. Although behaviorists do not put a specific emphasis on tolerating affect, many actions that behaviorists consider ignorable (whining, diversionary tactics, etc.) are behaviors that could be considered

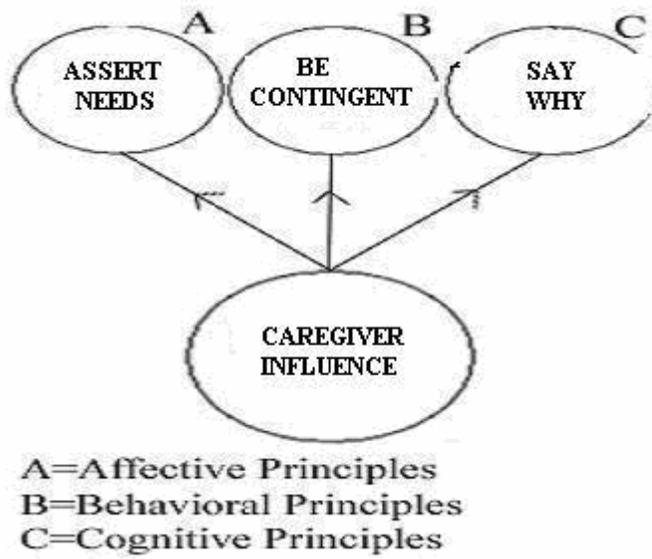
symbolic rather than overt expressions of affect. The “ignore much” principle is broader than the “accept affect” principle, however, in that it also covers many mild forms of overt misbehavior. While behaviorists do not characterize the “ignore much” principle in terms of promoting caregiver tolerance (they prefer to characterize it as a tool that contributes to behavior shaping), there is no question that a caregiver who follows the Behavioral discipline approach is one who does a great deal of tolerating.

The connection between the Cognitive “allow independence” principle and the discipline domain of tolerance reflects the fact that the Cognitive approach places a great deal of emphasis on promoting self-reliance, autonomy and a unique identity within children. It would be difficult to find any other explanation for the “allow independence” principle than as a means to make caregivers more tolerant.

**Influence.** As mentioned, I am using the term “influence” to refer to the domain that is sometimes termed “control.” The influence domain refers to the extent to which a caregiver sets limits on unacceptable child behavior, and ensures that unsafe, destructive or otherwise inappropriate actions are not tolerated. Each of the three discipline approaches helps a caregiver to do this through one of its principles (these are portrayed in Figure 8 below).

.....

**FIGURE 8 -Principles Associated With the Influence Domain**



.....

The connection between the Affective “assert needs” principle and the discipline domain of influence stems from the fact that this principle essentially says to caregivers: “You are an adult, so act like one. Don’t think that you can let a child do whatever he wants, whenever he wants to do it.” It encourages a caregiver to decide what her expectations are regarding behaviors that she will not tolerate, and to understand that *not communicating* those expectations is doing a disservice both to herself and to the child. This principle is a way of motivating caregivers to be more in control, by helping them understand that exerting some degree of influence is both necessary and good.

The connection between the Behavioral “be contingent” principle and the discipline domain of influence reflects the fact that the purpose of this principle is to help caregivers become more skilled and effective in influencing the direction of child conduct. This is accomplished by reinforcing only desired behaviors and by punishing (when they are not ignored) only undesired behaviors. The underlying idea is that influencing a child requires a significant degree of awareness by a caregiver of how her responses move a child towards

or away from a desired end point. How else can one view the “be contingent” principle than as a means for making a caregiver better able to modify child behavior and to be more effective at influencing his behavior?

The connection between the Cognitive “say why” principle and the discipline domain of influence reflects the fact that this principle encourages caregivers to give, or engineer, responses that let a child know the rationale underlying certain family, classroom or societal rules and expectations. Particular emphasis is given to helping a child to empathize with others whose rights, property or feelings are affected. The idea is that by mobilizing the child’s empathy and judgment, he will become better behaved. Certainly, it is reasonable to view this principle as a vehicle for helping caregivers to exercise resolve and good judgment in influencing the behavior of children.

#### **Integrating the Principles Around Three Desired Outcomes of Discipline**

Discipline has two sets of purposes: (a) short term purposes, and (b) long term purposes. The short term purposes of discipline are to change a specific behavior of a child from “unacceptable” to “acceptable” and to restore the balance in a caregiver-child system (family, classroom, etc.) from one of conflict to one of harmony. The long term purposes of discipline are to help children to become socially competent and well-adjusted individuals, both when they are young and as they grow into adulthood. Both of these goals are very important, but the second (building competence) is probably more important, especially given that it incorporates the first purpose, in that competent children are less likely to behave in ways that are bothersome to adults and that call forth a discipline response.

The use of the nine principles in attaining the short term purpose of securing compliance and restoring harmony is discussed in chapter 9. Because of its place in the

**hierarchical ABC model, as depicted in Figure 2, I shall devote more space now to discussing the link between the nine discipline principles and the long term child social competence outcomes of happiness, boldness and niceness.**

**In asserting that discipline influences social competence, it is necessary to say something about the term. Social competence, as with other psychological terms, has proven somewhat difficult to define. One reason is that it can be approached either in terms of outcomes or in terms of inputs, and some scholars get the two mixed up. A social competence outcome occurs when someone succeeds in a socially valued and age-relevant role, such as getting a high school diploma or landing a job. A social competence input refers to the behaviors or traits, such as “cooperativeness,” which contribute to these outcomes.**

**There are many kinds of behaviors that can fall under the outcome rubric of social competence. Three broad categories have been identified, and my colleagues and I (e.g., Greenspan & Driscoll, 1997) have termed these (a) temperament, (b) character, and (c) social intelligence.**

**Temperament refers to one’s degree of emotional, motivational and attentional stability, as reflected in the ability to sustain effort, take things in stride (without flying off the handle), and maintain a fairly consistent positive mood. Because the attentional component of temperament is largely affected by innate biological factors (such as genes or the presence or absence of brain damage), the aspect of temperament in the ABC model mainly focuses on positive mood and emotional self-regulation. The common term “happiness” subsumes many of these qualities, and I am using that term to depict the temperament component of social competence in the discipline model. Clearly, happiness is**

**a major goal of discipline as almost any caregiver, when asked what she wishes for a particular child, will state “to grow up to be a happy person” as her first response.**

**Character has two sub-types. The first refers to the ability to conform one’s behavior to societal expectations, and to generally behave in a way that others will view positively. In this book I am reframing character as “niceness.” A nice child is one whom other children, and adults, want to be around, while a “nasty” child is one whom others view negatively and wish to avoid or worse. Clearly, influencing children to be nice is a major goal of discipline. In fact, it is probably the most explicitly emphasized purpose, given that the dictionary (OED online) definition of parent and teacher discipline uses words such as “maintaining order” and “forming proper conduct”.**

**The other sub-type of character (and the third ideal competence trait depicted in the ABC Theory) is what I term “boldness.” This refers to the ability to assert one’s will in situations where to do otherwise would make one vulnerable. It also refers to the development of a unique identity and set of lifestyle preferences. While excessive boldness (i.e., when it is not paired with niceness) could make a person insufferable, there is no question that most of us want children to grow up into adults who are not shrinking violets, that is, who can make their presence known and, most importantly, possess the ability to say “no” in situations where others would mislead or coerce them down dangerous or undesired paths. This is an ideal outcome of discipline that is not always articulated by discipline experts (who often portray discipline as a matter solely of imposing one’s will on a child). Aside from moral considerations (most readers would probably agree that it is wrong to squash a child’s identity), caregivers who do not allow a child some room for**

sufficient autonomy are not likely to be successful in the short term (the child is likely to rebel) or in the long term (the child is not likely to be either happy or bold).

A third input domain of social competence has been very important in my own research, but I do not emphasize it in the discipline model. This domain has been termed “social intelligence”, and it refers to the extent to which a child or adult is “with it” or “out of it,” in terms of his awareness and understanding of people and their behavior. Social intelligence is obviously a very important contributor to success or failure in various social roles and situations. In terms of the ABC Theory, however, I prefer to view social intelligence as a “mediating variable” (which operates behind the scenes) and, thus, have not included it in Figure 2.

The model of social competence used in the theory, as portrayed in Figure 2 thus has three domains of “happiness” (emotional stability and positive mood), “boldness” (autonomous functioning), and “niceness” (kindness and appropriateness). In the remainder of this chapter, I point out briefly how all three major discipline approaches has a principle that can be viewed as contributing to the development of one of these three child social competence domains.

It should be pointed out that this linking up of discipline elements with desired child characteristics is not meant to suggest that children can be programmed to turn out a specific way. Rather, it is meant to further illuminate the nature and purposes of the various discipline principles and techniques.

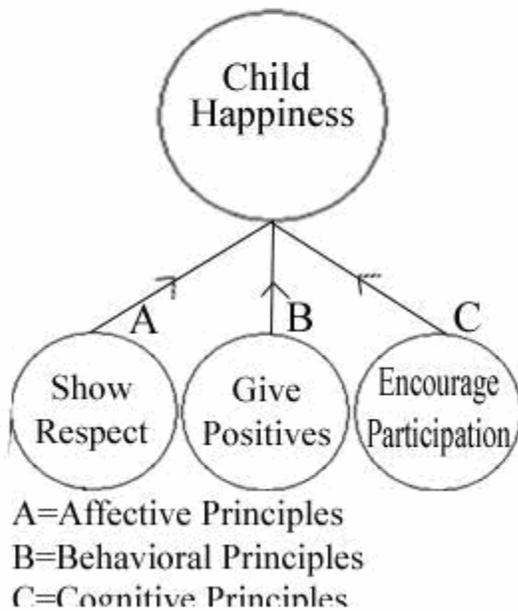
Happiness. To repeat, “happiness” refers to the ability of a child to maintain a generally positive mood, even in the face of occasional setbacks, and to feel generally good about himself and his life. It is my assertion that each of the three discipline approaches

have the effect of helping a child to become and remain happy through one of its principles (this is portrayed in Figure 9 below).

The link between the Affective “show respect” principle and the desired child characteristic of happiness is clear. A steady diet of put-downs, sarcasm and verbal abuse is likely to undermine a child’s self-confidence and cause him to become an unhappy person. The intent of the show respect principle is to help a caregiver to understand that discipline is about changing behavior but doing so in a way that does not make a child feel worthless.

.....

**FIGURE 9-- Principles Contributing to the Outcome of Happiness**



.....

The link between the Behavioral “give positives” principle and the desired child characteristic of happiness is also clear. A child who gets little or no praise and a steady

diet of punishment and criticism is very unlikely to be (or grow up to be) a happy child. An effect of the “give positives” principle (in which during a given day there is a ratio of five or more praises to punishments) is to create an environment in which children feel good about themselves and about life, and are better able to take occasional setbacks in stride.

The link between the Cognitive “encourage participation” principle and the desired child characteristic of happiness may not be self-evident, but I believe can be shown to exist. According to Cognitive discipline theorists, children have a basic need to feel important and in control of their lives. Satisfying this need, by giving the child a meaningful role in the governance of the family or classroom unit, for example, is likely to foster happiness while frustrating this need, as through an authoritarian discipline style, is likely to foster unhappiness and resentment.

The intent of the “encourage participation” principle is to help a caregiver to understand that discipline must be carried out in a manner that helps a child to feel it is not an arbitrary exercise in adult power. By putting so much emphasis on encouragement as a general and very frequent form of caregiver communication, Cognitive theorists aim to help children feel more optimistic and confident in their ability to deal with various life challenges. Optimism, the belief that one can cope with reality however complex and challenging it might be, is an obvious part of the human trait that we label “happiness”.

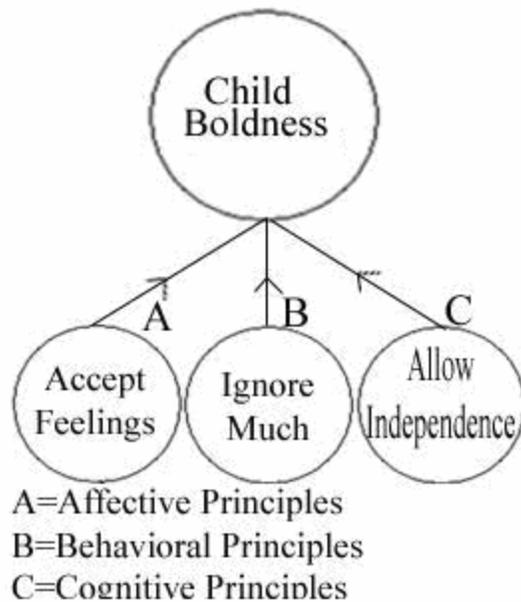
**Boldness.** To repeat, the term “boldness” refers to the ability of a child to assert himself when necessary, and to maintain a clear sense of his own preferences and needs. The link between three of the principles and this desired outcome is portrayed in Figure 10.

The link between the Affective “accept feelings” principle and the desired child characteristic of boldness is fairly evident. Few things are as likely to stifle a child’s

development of self-awareness and self-expression as being denied the opportunity to explore and communicate how he feels about things. The intent of the “accept feelings” principle is to show caregivers that they can set limits on behaviors without setting limits on the expression of the child’s thoughts or feelings.

.....

FIGURE 10- Principles Contributing to the Outcome of Boldness



.....

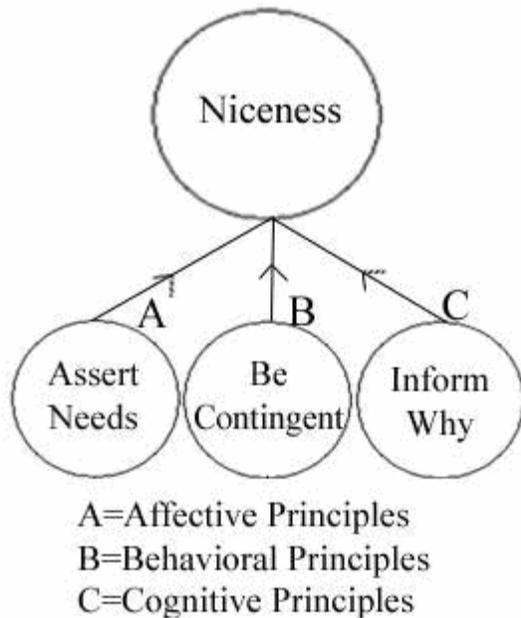
The link between the Behavioral “ignore much” principle and the desired child characteristic of boldness also does not need much explanation. A setting in which everything is commented on or otherwise responded to is one in which the child does not have much freedom to be himself. An effect of the “ignore much” principle is to give the child a fair amount of room for autonomy.

Likewise, the link between the Cognitive “allow independence” principle and the desired child characteristic of boldness also is evident. A child who is prevented from having sufficient autonomy in exploring his preferences and values is likely to be inhibited, uncertain and unable to assert himself when necessary. The intent of this principle (which is probably the one most central to the Cognitive approach) is to help a caregiver understand that promotion of boldness and autonomy is a key aspect of the discipline process.

Niceness. To repeat, the term “niceness” refers to the extent to which a child is disposed to abide by reasonable rules, to care about others and to behave in a way that causes others to like him. The link between three of the principles and this desired outcome is depicted in Figure 11.

.....

FIGURE 11— Principles Contributing to the Outcome of Niceness



.....

**There is a clear connection between the Affective “assert needs” principle and the desired child characteristic of niceness. Children exposed to extreme permissiveness, as in a total absence of caregiver limit-setting, have a great deal of difficulty coming to understand that they live in a world where the needs and feelings of other people count as much as their own. The intent of the “assert needs” principle is to convey to caregivers that being a good caregiver is not just a matter of making a child happy, but also involves educating him about the importance of being a kind, considerate and well-behaved person.**

**The link between the Behavioral “be contingent” principle and the desired child characteristic of niceness may not be as evident, but nonetheless is very strong. When a caregiver does not clearly differentiate between desired and undesired actions, as when she praises bad behavior and punishes good behavior, the child becomes confused as to what is expected, and may go down the path of misbehavior on the mistaken impression that it is a good thing. An effect of the “be contingent” principle is to help a caregiver to be more skilled in shaping nice behavior and guiding a child down the path to social acceptability.**

**The link between the Cognitive “inform why” principle and the desired child characteristic of niceness is obvious, but it must be remembered that in the Cognitive discipline literature, informing is to be done more through subtle manipulation of consequences rather than through direct verbal exhortation, which often can turn into a put-down or a power struggle. Disciplining a child through physical intimidation, or by statements such as “because I said so,” is not likely to contribute to the development of internalized societal values and sensitivity towards the needs and feelings of others. The intent of the “inform why” principle is to help a caregiver to understand that the best way**

**to influence a child to be a responsible person is to help him demonstrate empathy for and understanding of others.**

### **Summary**

**This chapter laid out the ABC Theory of Discipline. The three predominant discipline models—Affective, Behavioral and Cognitive—were shown to each have three principles, one “loading” on each of the three discipline domains of “Warmth”, “Tolerance” and “Influence”. The three principles from each model were also shown to facilitate the development of three forms of social competence: Happiness, Boldness and Niceness. This theory, and the three discipline models, will be described more fully in the next three chapters. Following that, we shall move from an abstract discussion of the theory to a more concrete discussion of how it can be put into practice in addressing various behavioral challenges posed by children in family and classroom settings.**