

Discipline and Your Child



As a parent, it is your job to teach your child the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. But getting your child to behave the way you want is not as hard as you think. This brochure will help you learn effective ways to discipline your child.

Because learning takes time, especially for a young child, you may find that it takes several weeks of working on a behavior before you see a change. Try not to get frustrated when you don't see the results of your efforts right away.

Discipline vs punishment

Many parents think discipline and punishment are the same thing. However, they are really quite different. Discipline is a whole system of teaching based on a good relationship, praise, and instruction for the child on how to control his behavior. Punishment is negative; an unpleasant consequence for doing or not doing something. Punishment should only be a very small part of discipline.

Effective discipline should take place all the time, not just when children misbehave. Children are more likely to change their behavior when they feel encouraged and valued, not shamed and humiliated. When children feel good about themselves and cherish their relationship with their parents, they are more likely to listen and learn.

Encourage good behavior from infancy

You can begin laying the groundwork for good behavior from the time your child is born. When you respond to your infant's cries, you are teaching her that you are there, you can be counted on when she needs you, and that she can trust you. When your child is about 2 months of age, start to modify your responses and encourage your baby to establish good sleeping patterns by letting her fall asleep on her own. By keeping a reasonably steady schedule, you can guide her toward eating, sleeping, and playing at times that are appropriate for your family. This lays the groundwork for acceptable behavior later on.

Once your baby starts to crawl (between 6 and 9 months of age) and as she learns to walk (between 9 and 16 months of age), safety is the most critical discipline issue. The best thing you can do for your child at this age is to give her the freedom to explore certain things and make other things off-limits. For example, put childproof locks on some cabinets, such as those that contain heavy dishes or pots, but leave other cabinets open. Fill the open cabinets with plastic containers or soft materials that your child can play with. This feeds your baby's need to explore and practice, but in safe ways that are acceptable to you.

You will need to provide extra supervision during this period. If your child moves toward a dangerous object, such as a hot stove, simply pick her up, firmly say, "no, hot" and offer her a toy to play with instead. She may laugh at first as she tries to understand you but, after a few weeks, she will learn.

Discipline issues become more complex at about 18 months of age. At this time, a child wants to know how much power she has and will test the limit of

that power over and over again. It is important for parents to decide—together—what those limits will be and stick to them. Parents need to be very clear about what is acceptable behavior. This will reduce the child's confusion and her need to test. Setting consistent guidelines for children when they are young also will help establish important rules for the future.

Tips to avoid trouble

The first thing to remember is to avoid power struggles whenever possible. Instead, address only those issues that truly are important to you. The following tips may help:

- **Offer choices whenever possible.** By giving choices, you can set limits and still allow your child some independence. For example, try saying, "Would you like to pick up your toys yourself, or should I help you?"
- **Make a game out of good behavior.** Your child is more likely to do what you want if you make it fun. For example, you might say, "Let's have a race and see who can put his coat on first."
- **Plan ahead.** If you know that certain circumstances always cause trouble, such as a trip to the store, discuss with your child ahead of time what behavior is acceptable and what the consequences will be if he does not obey. Try to plan the shopping trip for a time when your child is well rested and well fed, and take along a book or small toy to amuse him if he gets bored.
- **Praise good behavior.** Whenever your child remembers to follow the rules, offer encouragement and praise about how well he did. You do not need any elaborate system of rewards. You can simply say, "Thank you for coming right away," and hug your child.

Strategies that work

Of course you cannot avoid trouble all of the time. Sooner or later your child will test you. It is your child's way of finding out whether you can be trusted and really will do what you say you will do if she does not listen to you.

When your child does not listen, try the following techniques. Not only will they encourage your child to cooperate now, but they will teach her how to behave in the future as well.

Natural consequences. When a child sees the natural consequences of her actions, she experiences the direct results of her choices. (But be sure the consequences do not place her in any danger.) For example, if your child spills her milk on purpose, she will not have milk to drink. If she throws and breaks her toy, she will not be able to play with it. It will not be long before your child learns to not spill her milk and to play carefully with her toys.

When you use this method, resist the urge to lecture your child or to rescue her (by getting more milk, for example). Your child will learn best when she learns for herself and will not blame you for the consequences she receives.

Logical consequences. Natural consequences work best, but they are not always appropriate. For example, if your child does not pick up her toys, they may be in the way. But chances are she will not care as much as you do. In this situation, you will need to step in; creating a consequence that is closely connected to her actions. You might tell her that if she does not pick up her toys, then you will put them away—but she will not play with them again for a whole day.

When you use this method, it is important that you mean what you say and that you are prepared to follow through *immediately*. Let your child know that you are serious. You do not have to yell and scream to do this. You can say it in a calm, matter-of-fact way.

Withholding privileges. In the heat of the moment, you will not always be able to think of a logical consequence. That is when you may want to tell your child that, if she does not cooperate, she will have to give something up she likes. The following are a few things to keep in mind when you use this technique:

- Never take away something your child truly needs, such as a meal.
- Choose something that your child really likes.
- Be sure you can follow through on your promise.

Time-out. Time-out should be your last resort and you should use it only when other responses do not work. Time-outs work well when the behavior you are trying to punish is clearly defined and you know when it occurred. Time-outs can be helpful if you need a break in the action (for example, if your child is hitting a sibling or friend). You can use a time-out with a child as young as 1 year old. Follow these steps to make a time-out work:

1. Choose a time-out spot. This should be a boring place with no distractions, such as a chair. (Bathrooms can be dangerous and bedrooms may become playgrounds.) Decide what two or three behaviors will be punished with time-out and explain this to your child.
2. When your child does something she knows will result in a time-out, you may warn her once (unless it is aggression). If it happens again, send her to her time-out spot immediately. Tell her what she did wrong in as few words as possible. A rule of thumb is 1 minute of time out for every year of your child's age. (For example, a 4-year-old would get a 4-minute time-out.) But even 15 seconds will work. If your child will not go to the spot on her own, pick her up and carry her there. If she will not stay, stand behind her and hold her gently but firmly by the shoulders or restrain her in your lap and say, "I am holding you here because you have to have a time-out." Do not discuss it any further. It should only take a couple of weeks before she learns to cooperate.
3. Once your child is capable of sitting quietly, set a timer so that she will know when the time-out is over. If fussing starts again, restart the timer. Wait until your child stops protesting before you set the timer.
4. When the time is up, help your child return to a positive activity. Your child has "served her time." Hug her and welcome her back. If you need to discuss her behavior, wait several minutes before doing so.

Tips to make discipline more effective

You will have days when it seems impossible to get your child to behave. But there are ways to ease frustration and avoid unnecessary conflict with your child.

- **Be aware of your child's abilities and limitations.** Children develop at different rates and have different strengths and weaknesses. When your child misbehaves, it may be that he simply cannot do what you are asking of him.
- **Think before you speak.** Once you make a rule or promise, you will need to stick to it. Be sure you are being realistic.
- **Remember that children do what "works."** If your child throws a temper tantrum in the grocery store and you bribe him to stop by giving him candy, he will probably throw another tantrum the next time you go. Make an effort to avoid reinforcing the wrong kinds of behavior, even with just your attention.
- **Work toward consistency.** No one is consistent all of the time. But try to make sure that your goals, rules, and approaches to discipline stay the same from day to day. Children find frequent changes confusing and may resort to testing limits just to find out what the limits are.
- **Pay attention to your child's feelings.** If you can figure out why your child is misbehaving, you are one step closer to solving the problem. Often it helps to let your child know that you understand. For example, "I know you are feeling sad that your friend is leaving, but you still have to pick up your toys."
- **Learn to see mistakes—including your own—as opportunities to learn.** If you do not handle a situation well the first time, don't despair. Figure out what you could have done differently, and do it the next time. If you feel you have made a real mistake in the heat of the moment, wait to cool down, apologize to your child, and explain how you will handle the situation in the future.

Set an example

Telling your child how to behave is an important part of discipline, but showing her how to behave is even more significant. Children learn a lot about temper and self-control from watching their parents and other adults interact. If they see adults relating in a positive way toward one another, they will learn that this is how others should be treated. This is how children learn to act respectfully.

Even though your children's behavior and values seem to be on the right track, your children will still challenge you because it is in their nature and is a part of growing up. Children are constantly learning what their limits are, and they need their parents to help them understand those limits. By doing so, parents can help their children feel capable and loved, learn right from wrong, and develop good behavior and a positive approach toward life.

Why spanking is not the best choice

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that if punishment is needed, alternatives to spanking should be used.

Although most Americans were spanked as children, we now know that it has several important side effects.

- It may seem to work at the moment, but it is no more effective in changing behavior than a time-out.
- Spanking increases aggression and anger instead of teaching responsibility.
- Parents may intend to stay calm but often do not, and regret their actions later.
- Because most parents do not want to spank, they are less likely to be consistent.
- Spanking makes other consequences less effective, such as those used at day care or school. Gradually, even spanking loses its impact.
- Spanking can lead to physical struggles and even escalate to the point of harming the child.
- Children who are spanked are more likely to be depressed, use alcohol, have more anger, hit their own children, approve of and hit their spouses, and engage in crime and violence as adults.

These results make sense since spanking teaches the child that causing others pain is justified to control them—even with those they love.

If you are having trouble disciplining your child or need more information on alternatives to spanking, talk to your pediatrician.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

