

About Discipline

The first goal of discipline is to protect your child from danger. Another very important goal is to teach your child an understanding of right from wrong. Good discipline gradually changes a self-centered child into a mature adult who is thoughtful and respectful of others, assertive without being hostile, and in control of his or her impulses. Reasonable limit-setting keeps us from raising a "spoiled" child. The word "discipline" means "to teach." It does not mean "to punish."

To teach respect for the rights of others, first teach your child about parents' rights. Children need parents who are "in charge." You will need to start showing your child that you are in charge at about 6 months of age. Children do not start to develop self-control until 3 or 4 years of age. They continue to need you to help control their impulses and testing, in gradually decreasing amounts, through adolescence.

If your child has several discipline problems or is out of control, start reading the section titled "How to Begin a Discipline Program." If you want to learn more about normal discipline, go directly to the section titled "Guidelines for Setting Rules."

How To Begin a Discipline Program

1. List problem behaviors.

What do you want to change? Over the next 3 or 4 days, note and write down your child's most inappropriate or annoying behaviors.

2. Set priorities for correcting the problem behavior.

Some misbehavior needs immediate attention (for example, behavior that might harm your child or others). Some behavior is too annoying or obnoxious to be ignored (such as not going to bed). Some unpleasant behavior (such as, saying "No" all the time between age 2 and 3) is normal and should be tolerated. Some families with a child who is out of control have too many rules and need to think about what misbehavior can be overlooked.

3. Write house rules about the most important kinds of misbehavior.

See the section titled "Guidelines for Setting Rules."

4. Decide what consequence you will use for each type of misbehavior.

All behavior, good and bad, is mainly affected (or shaped) by consequences. If the consequence is pleasant (for example, a reward or praise), the child is more likely to repeat that behavior. If the consequence is unpleasant (a punishment), the child is less likely to do the same thing again.

Young children usually do not respond to lectures or reminders. Actions speak louder than words. The most effective actions are ignoring the misbehavior, redirecting the child to appropriate behavior, or giving your child a time-out. For further information on forms of punishment, see the section titled "Discipline Techniques."

5. Stop any physical punishment.

Most out-of-control children are already too aggressive. Physical punishment (such as slapping the hand or spanking) teaches them that it's OK to be aggressive (for example, hit or hurt someone else) to solve problems.

6. Stop yelling.

Yelling and screaming teach your child to yell back; you are thereby legitimizing shouting matches. Your child will sense from your yelling that you are not feeling in charge. Yelling often escalates the disagreement into a win-lose battle. Your child will respond better in the long run to a pleasant tone of voice and words of diplomacy.

7. Don't take your child to public places until his or her behavior is under control at home.

Misbehaving children are usually more difficult to control in a shopping mall or supermarket than at home. Leave your child with a baby sitter or spouse when you need to go to these places.

8. Take daily breaks from your child.

Ask your spouse to give you a break from supervising your young child and take over all the discipline for a few hours. If this is impossible, hire a teenager a few times a week to look after your child while you go out. Also make a "date" for a weekly night out with your spouse or a friend.

9. Give your child more positive feedback.

Children respond to discipline from people they feel loved by and want to please. Every child needs daily praise, smiles, and hugs. Give your child this increased attention when he or she is not demanding it. Try especially hard to notice the times when your child is being good. If your child receives more negative comments and criticisms each day than positive responses, you need to restore an emotionally healthy balance by having less rules, criticizing your child less, and giving your child more praise and affection. Many experts feel that it takes several positive contacts to counter one negative one. (For further information, see the section titled "Guidelines for Positive Reinforcement.")

10. Protect your child's self-esteem.

Your child's self-esteem is more important than how well disciplined he or she is. Don't discuss your child's discipline problems and your concerns about him or her when your child is around. Correct your child in a kind way. Sometimes begin your correction with "I'm sorry I can't let you" Don't label your child a "bad girl" or "bad boy." After punishment is over, welcome your child back into the family circle, telling him or her that all is forgiven.

Guidelines for Setting Rules

1. Begin discipline at about 6 months of age.

Newborns don't need any discipline. Starting at 6 months, however, parents can begin to clarify their own rights. If your child makes it difficult to change a diaper by kicking and wiggling you can say firmly, "No, help Mommy change your diaper." By 8 months of age, children need rules for their own safety.

2. Express each unacceptable behavior as a clear and concrete rule.

Your child may not understand vague descriptions of misbehavior such as "hyperactive," "irresponsible," or "mean." The younger the child, the more concrete the rule must be. Examples of clear rules are: "Don't push your brother" and "Don't interrupt me on the telephone."

3. Also state the acceptable, desired, or appropriate behavior.

Your child needs to know what is expected of him or her. Examples are: "Play with your brother," "Look at books when I'm on the telephone," or "Walk, don't run." Make your praise of good behavior specific; for example, "Thank you for being quiet."

4. Ignore unimportant or irrelevant misbehavior.

The more rules you have, the less likely your child is to obey them. Constant criticism usually doesn't work. Behavior such as swinging the legs, poor table manners, or normal negativism is unimportant during the early years.

5. Use rules that are fair and attainable.

Rules must fit your child's age. A child should not be punished for clumsiness when he or she is learning to walk, nor for poor pronunciation when the child is learning to speak. In addition, a child should not be punished for behavior that is part of normal emotional development, such as thumbsucking, fears of being separated from his or her parents, and toilet training accidents.

6. Concentrate on two or three rules initially.

Give highest priority to issues of safety, such as not running into the street, and to the prevention of harm to others. Of next importance is behavior that damages property. Then come all the annoying misbehaviors that wear you down.

7. Avoid trying to change "no-win" power struggles through punishment.

"No-win behavior" is behavior that usually cannot be controlled by the parent if the child decides to continue it. Examples are wetting pants, hair pulling, thumbsucking, body rocking, masturbation, not eating enough, not going to sleep, and refusal to complete schoolwork. The first step in resolving such a power struggle is to withdraw from the conflict and stop punishing your child for the misbehavior. Then give your child positive reinforcement, such as praise or incentives, when he or she behaves as you'd like. (See the section titled "Guidelines for Positive Reinforcement.")

8. Apply the rules consistently.

After the parents agree on the rules, it may be helpful to write them down and post them in a conspicuous place in the home.

Discipline Techniques (Including Consequences)

1. Summary of techniques to use for different ages

The techniques mentioned here are further described after this list.

- From birth to 6 months: no discipline necessary.
- From 6 months to 3 years: structuring the home environment, distracting, ignoring, verbal and nonverbal disapproval, moving or escorting your child, and temporary time-out.
- From 3 years to 5 years: the preceding techniques (especially temporary time-out), plus natural consequences, restricting places where your child can misbehave, and logical consequences.
- From 5 years to adolescence: the preceding techniques plus delay of a privilege, "I" messages, and negotiation via family conferences. Structuring the environment and distraction can be discontinued.
- Adolescence: logical consequences, "I" messages, and family conferences about house rules. By the time your child is an adolescent, you should stop using manual guidance and time-out techniques.

2. Structuring the home environment

You can change your child's surroundings so that an object or situation that could cause a problem is eliminated. Examples are: putting breakables out of reach, fencing in a yard, setting up gates, putting locks on a special desk, or locking certain rooms.

3. Distracting your child from misbehavior

Distracting a young child from temptation by attracting his or her attention to something else is especially helpful when the child is in someone else's house, a doctor's office, or a store. It would be difficult to use other options for discipline (such as time-out) in such places. You may also want to give your child something to distract him or her from trouble if you're going to be busy at home with guests, the telephone, or feeding a baby. Most children can be distracted with toys or food. School-age children may need books, games, or other activities to keep their attention. Distracting is also called "diverting" or "redirecting."

4. Ignoring the misbehavior

Ignoring helps stop unacceptable behavior that is harmless—such as tantrums, sulking, whining, quarreling, or interrupting. The proper way to ignore this behavior is to move away from your child, turn your back, avoid eye contact, and stop any conversation with your child. Ignore any protests or excuses. Sometimes you may need to leave the area where your child is misbehaving. Ignoring is also called extinction.

5. Verbal and nonverbal disapproval

Mild disapproval is often all that is required to stop a young child's misbehavior. Get close to your child, get eye contact, look stern, and give a brief, direct instruction, such as "No" or "Stop." You can speak in a disapproving but soft tone because you are close to your child. Show your child what you want him or her to do. You may want to underscore that you are serious by pointing or shaking your finger. The most common mistake parents make when they use this technique is smiling or laughing.

6. Moving or escorting (manual guidance)

"Manual guidance" means that you move a child from one place to another against his or her will. Sometimes children must be physically moved from a place where they are causing trouble to a time-out chair. At other times they must be taken to the bed, bath, or car if they refuse to go on their own. Guide your child by the hand or forearm. If your child refuses to be led, pick the child up from behind and carry him or her.

7. Temporary time-out or social isolation

Time-out removes the child from the scene of the unacceptable behavior to a boring place (for example, a playpen, corner, chair, or bedroom). Time-out is the most effective discipline technique available to parents for dealing with misbehaving infants and young children. Time-outs should last about 1 minute per year of age and not more than 5 minutes.

8. Natural consequences

By experiencing the natural consequences of his or her own actions, your child learns good behavior from the natural laws of the physical world. Examples are: Coming to dinner late means the food will be cold; not dressing properly for the weather means your child will be cold or wet; not wearing mittens while playing in the snow will lead to cold hands; running on ice can lead to falling down; putting sand in the mouth leads to an unpleasant taste; breaking a toy means it isn't fun to play with anymore; and going to

bed late means being sleepy in the morning. Although it is very helpful for children to learn from their mistakes, it is important that they not be allowed to do anything that could hurt them or others, such as by playing with matches or running into the street.

9. Restricting places where a child can misbehave

This technique is especially helpful for behavior problems that can't be eliminated. Allowing such misbehavior as nose picking and masturbation in your child's room prevents an unnecessary power struggle. Roughhousing can be restricted to outdoors. You may decide to allow your child to ride the tricycle only in the basement during winter.

10. Logical consequences

Logical consequences are consequences that you impose on your child as a result of his or her misbehavior. They should be logically related to the misbehavior, making your child accountable for his or her problems and decisions. Many logical consequences are simply the temporary removal of a possession or privilege. Examples are: taking away toys or crayons that are not handled properly, not replacing a lost toy, not repairing a broken toy, sending your child to school partially dressed if the child won't dress himself or herself, having your child clean up milk the child has spilled or a floor the child has tracked mud on, having your child clean messy underwear, and turning off the TV if children are quarreling about it. In addition, your child can temporarily lose TV, telephone, shopping, bicycle, and car privileges if they are misused. The schoolteacher will provide appropriate logical consequences if your child does not complete homework assignments.

Do not punish children by depriving them of basic essentials, such as a meal; organized activities with groups such as a team or scout troop; or events your child has looked forward to for a long time, such as going to the circus.

11. Delay of a privilege

This technique involves requiring your child to finish a less preferable activity before a more preferable one is allowed ("work before play"). Examples are: "After you clean your room, you can go out and play"; "When you finish your homework, you can watch TV"; and "When you have tasted all your foods, you can have dessert."

12. "I" messages

When your child misbehaves, tell your child how you feel. Say, "I am upset when you do such and such." Your child is more likely to listen and respond positively to you than if everything you say to your child starts with "you." "You" messages usually trigger a defensive reaction.

13. Negotiation and family conferences

As children become older they need more communication and discussion with their parents about problems. A parent can begin such a conversation by saying, "We need to change these things. What are some ways we could handle this?" Discussions involving the whole family (family conferences) also are helpful.

Guidelines For Giving Consequences (Punishments)

1. Be unambivalent.

Mean what you say and follow through. Be stern and tough. Take charge.

2. Correct with love.

Talk to your child the way you want people to talk to you. Avoid yelling or using a disrespectful tone of voice. For example, say gently, "I'm sorry you left the yard. Now you must stay in the house."

3. Give one warning or reminder before you punish your child.

When you know your child understands the rule, this warning is unnecessary and you can punish your child without a warning. Do not just keep repeating threats of punishment if your child doesn't stop what he or she is doing.

4. Punish your child for clear intent of aggressive behavior.

Try to stop your child before someone is hurt or damage is done. An example would be that you see your child raising a toy to hit a playmate.

5. Give the consequence immediately.
Delayed consequences are less effective because young children forget why they are being punished. Punishment should occur very soon after the misbehavior and be administered by the adult who witnessed the misdeed. An exception for children older than 4 or 5 years of age is when they misbehave outside the home, where you cannot give a time-out. You could put checkmarks on your child's hand with a felt-tip pen to indicate the number of punishments the child will receive when you get home. The punishments might be 30 minutes of lost TV time for each checkmark.
6. Make a one-sentence comment about the rule when you punish your child.
Avoid making a long speech.
7. Ignore your child's arguments while you are correcting him or her.
This is the child's way of delaying punishment. Especially under 3 years of age, children mainly understand action, not words.
8. Make the punishment brief.
Take toys out of circulation for no more than 1 or 2 days. Time-outs should last no longer than 1 minute per year of the child's age.
9. Keep the consequence in proportion to the misbehavior.
Also try to make the consequence relate to the misbehavior (logical consequences).
10. Follow the consequence with love and trust.
Welcome your child back into the family circle and do not comment upon the previous misbehavior or require an apology for it.
11. Direct the punishment against the misbehavior, not the person.
Avoid degrading comments such as, "You never do anything right."
12. Expect behavior to get worse before it gets better.
Children who are out of control initially go through a phase of testing their parents before they comply with the new system. This testing usually lasts 2 or 3 days.

Guidelines for Positive Reinforcement of Desired Behavior

Most parents don't give enough positive reinforcement, especially touching and hugs. Don't take good behavior for granted. Watch for behavior you like, then praise your child by saying such things as "I like the way you ...," or "I appreciate" When you say this, move close to your child, look at him or her, smile, and be affectionate. A parent's affection and attention is the favorite reward of most children.

There are two kinds of positive reinforcement: social and material. Social positive reinforcement, such as praise, should be used when your child behaves in a desired way. Praise the behavior, not the person. Examples are sharing toys, showing good manners, doing chores, playing cooperatively, treating the baby gently, petting the dog gently, being a good sport, cleaning the room, or reading a book. Your child can also be praised for trying, such as trying to use the potty or attempting something difficult, like a puzzle. Praise will make your child want to behave well more often. Try to "catch" your child being good, and comment on it three or more times for every one time you need to discipline or criticize your child.

Material reinforcers (incentives) are often candy, animal crackers, money or video-time. Use incentives to increase the frequency of more responsible behavior. They may be useful in overcoming resistance when children are entrenched in power struggles around "no-win" behaviors (for example, wetting or soiling their pants). Incentives should be used for only one problem behavior at a time and when praise alone hasn't worked. They should be phased out and replaced by natural (social) reinforcers as soon as possible.

Call Your Child's Healthcare Provider During Office Hours If:

- Your child's misbehavior is dangerous.
- The instances of misbehavior seem too numerous to count.
- Your child is also having behavior problems at school.
- Your child doesn't seem to have many good points.
- Your child seems depressed.
- The parents can't agree on discipline.
- You can't give up physical punishment. (Note: Call immediately if you are afraid you might hurt your child.)