



## Guiding Young Children Series

# Responses to Misbehavior

Elaine Wilson, Ph.D.  
Parenting Specialist

Despite parents' efforts to prevent misbehavior, there will still be times when children misbehave and parents must respond. The parent may have tried changing the setting, checking on the child's health needs, and using more do's than don'ts. The child misbehaves and the parent must take positive, direct action.

Parents can choose how to respond to misbehavior. Using effective discipline methods in response to misbehavior benefits the parent and the child. The child learns to take responsibility for behavior, and the parent and child have a warm, healthy relationship. The goal of effective discipline is to teach the child how to behave, not to make the child suffer.

The most effective method for some parents and children may not be effective for others. Try the methods that seem right for you. It may take a week or longer to feel comfortable using the new technique. If you like the results, add it to your discipline style. It is important to know characteristics of your child's age and stage. It will give you an idea of what method may work best for your child, or at least the one you might try first.

### Redirect the Child's Attention

Infants and toddlers can be easily distracted by providing them with an interesting alternative. For example, a child's attention can be diverted from playing with your watch to playing with some toy keys. You can distract a child from pulling hair by shaking a rattle.

Another way to divert or redirect a child is simply to take the child's hand. Guide the child, either away from the misbehavior or toward what you want the child to do. For example, suppose it's bedtime and Peter does not want to go to bed. Simply take his hand and say "Let's go get a book to read." Be sure to use positive words and give the child some choices that are acceptable. If Peter is protesting going to bed, instead of giving him a chance to argue, give him choices. You can say, "Do you want to wear your red pajamas or your yellow ones?" or "Which book do you want to read?"

Redirecting behavior is one of the very best guidance techniques because it turns bad behavior into good behavior. It can work for all ages. Redirection shows children how we want them to behave. For redirection to work, there must be choices. Parents must have an acceptable alternative activity to offer the child. In several communities, parents have made extra efforts to offer teenagers safe, fun activities on prom night and at graduation.

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets  
are also available on our website at:  
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>



**Infants and toddlers can be easily distracted by providing them with an interesting alternative.**

### Ignore Misbehavior

Often children misbehave because they want our attention. Spending time, listening, and sharing with your child will reduce misbehavior. If parents give children attention when they behave well, the times of misbehavior will be fewer. Children want attention. If misbehaving is the only way a child can get attention, even if the attention is a spanking and yelling, then they will misbehave.

An example of this is the four-year-old's use of bad words. Reggie says a bad word. His mother acts shocked or laughs. We can be sure Reggie will use bad words as often as possible. Imagine the sense of power it gives him to see his mother's reaction! If mother could calmly say, "Please do not use that word," and go on about her business, Reggie will soon stop saying the words. Parents should correct bad words just as they correct grammar. Expect the child to speak the way parents speak. It is important for parents to model good behavior.

Ignoring misbehavior is not child neglect. The adult knows what the child is doing and makes sure the child is safe. Some parents tell the child they will ignore them until the behavior changes. "I will talk with you when you stop whining." Sometimes the parent must tell others why the child's

misbehavior is being ignored. "I know Christy has not come to eat yet. When she sees how much fun we are having, she will join us."

Your most powerful discipline technique is your attention. Give children attention when they are behaving well. Try to ignore foul language, temper tantrums, silliness, and exaggeration.

## When Brothers and Sisters Fight

Ignoring misbehavior can also be an effective way to deal with fighting among brothers and sisters. Jealousy, the feeling that one child gets more love and attention than the other is most often the cause of such bickering. Children know that they can get their parents' attention by fighting and arguing. Ignore disagreements between children in the family. Children can work out their conflicts. An exception, though, is to quickly intervene if a child is in danger of physical harm. Put an end to the danger. Give the children a safe way to work out their problem. Then leave them to solve it.

When a parent hears a disagreement, they should check to see that the children are safe. Then leave the children alone. If the children can see you, it is difficult to keep from being involved. You may need to go into another room where you can see and hear the preschoolers or hear the school-age children. Remember, if you do not provide the children with an audience, referee, and judge, arguing is not nearly as rewarding.

If a parent does not become involved when a disagreement occurs, one of the children will probably come running to the parent. "Mommy, Susan took my doll away!" or "Daddy, Jason hit me!" The child is trying to get the parent to take sides and scold or punish the other child. In these cases, the parent can calmly say, "I am sorry you are having a problem, but you can work it out for yourselves."

Stopping arguments and settling conflicts for children does not teach children a better way to settle arguments. During calm times, not during the fight, is when children can be taught how to settle conflicts in a positive way. Teach children how to use words instead of hitting before a conflict arises. Showing them how to express their feelings prevents



**Holding helps a child regain self-control, especially when the child is frightened.**

future conflicts. Telling a child not to hit is not enough. Teach the child to say, "I do not like it when you grab the ball away from me."

Parents who are involved may not know the whole story, and may not be settling the fight fairly. They may see Michael hit Steven first. However, they may not realize that yesterday Steven pinched Michael when the parents were not looking.

Settling your children's arguments for them does not give the children a chance to learn to get along with others. For a month, try letting the children settle their own arguments. Most likely, you will discover they are having fewer quarrels and are getting along much better.

## Be Firm

One effective discipline method, being firm, is often overlooked because it is so simple. Have you ever wondered why a child does what one parent says, but not the other? One parent firmly says "Jacob, it's bedtime now," and Jacob does not argue. The other parent says less firmly, "Jacob go to bed now," and he continues to play.

When parents clearly and firmly demand that a child do something, the child usually does it. Being firm does not mean yelling. Being firm and the loudness of your voice is not the same thing. Using a wishy-washy tone of voice does not get a response from the child. Use a tone of voice that lets your child know you mean what you say and that you expect your child to do it. Make a clear demand. Don't reason, justify, threaten, or take away privileges. If there is no choice, do not ask the child if this is okay. If you want to know if the child heard you ask, "Did you hear me?" If you think there may be a good reason for the misbehavior ask, "Why are you still playing and not going to bed?"

Being firm works for any age child and almost any problem. Children cooperate when they know their parents mean what they say. They also know when parents do not mean what they say and do not follow through consistently.

### Case Study

Shannon's mother had trouble getting Shannon to go to bed at night. She tried spanking, reasoning, and taking away television, but nothing worked. She just would not go to bed, and even began to fall asleep at school because she was not getting enough sleep. Even though Shannon was sleepy and grouchy every morning, her mother still got her off to school. Shannon knew when her mother meant business and when she did not. When Shannon's mother became as firm about going to bed as she was about going to school, the problem disappeared.

When parents are trying to change to be more firm, children may not respond because of past experiences. Keep repeating the demand until the child realizes there is no choice. You will be amazed at the results, once your child realizes there is no choice.

To be firm successfully, parents need to follow through and see that the child obeys. This means that you must decide upon your three to five most important rules. These relate to your values, to safety, and to your goals for your child. Be firm on the problems you feel most strongly about. If other misbehaviors are not serious or important, ignore them. Do

not try to control every aspect of the child's life. You will spend too much time and energy on unimportant things. Your child will become discouraged. Decide upon your most important issues and be firm about them.

## Don't Let the Situation Get Out of Hand

Deal with a situation before you become frustrated and angry. This prevents many behavior problems. Parents should be aware of their own feelings as well as being aware of the feelings of the child.

### Case Study

The mother of a four-year-old said, "My four-year-old demands a lot of attention. I was trying to play with her when I was busy or tired. Consequently, I wound up frustrated." When you are frustrated, tell your child how you feel. For example, mother can say, "Adrienne, I have a headache and that noise really bothers me right now." Then Adrienne will probably go somewhere else to play, or find something quieter to play with. This is much better than mother waiting to explode and saying, "Get out of here, you are giving me a headache!"

Stay alert for safety. Watch for signs that your child is tired or hungry. When you find yourselves in a difficult situation, look for a solution. Maybe you can quickly direct your child's attention to something positive. If you have to wait in line or ride in the car for a long time, singing might be a good distraction.

## Be Detached

When you are upset, you cannot discipline wisely. You cannot make the best choices when you are angry. Your emotions get in the way of clear thinking. You do and say things that you later regret. Calm parents make better choices. No parent always stays calm and cool. Most parents sooner or later get angry and upset with their children. They worry about what others will think about their child's behavior.

For example, parents become upset when their child talks back to them. Parents love their children and take their child's misbehavior personally. We do not get as upset when a neighbor's child is sassy toward us. We do not like it, but it does not upset us as much as it does with our own child.

Here is how to detach yourself. If your child does something that usually upsets you, imagine that your child is your neighbor's child. What would you do? How would you handle it? That is what you should do when your own child misbehaves. Be calm and detached.

Another way to detach yourself is to imagine that you are your child's teacher, aunt, or uncle. Suppose your child kicks you and says, "I hate you, you are a mean mother!" Imagine you are the child's teacher. How would she handle the situation? Being detached helps to improve the child's behavior.

## Holding

Just as parents cannot discipline wisely when they are upset, children cannot hear reason when they are upset. It is useless to try talking or reasoning with a child who is completely out of control.

Sometimes a child has completely lost control and begins hitting, kicking, and screaming. He is having a temper tantrum. Hold the child firmly until the child calms down and gains self-control. Tell the child that you know he is angry. Telling him, "I cannot let you hurt anyone, so I will hold you until you feel better," will help the child calm down.

Sometimes it is necessary to hold the child firmly by the wrists to protect the child, the parent or another person. Do this calmly and in a loving manner. Hold the child on your lap with your arms firmly around him and holding the wrists. If necessary, place the child's feet between your legs to prevent kicking. Gradually reduce the firmness with which you hold the child as he calms down. Humming or singing soothingly will help release your tensions and soothe the child's feelings. This way the parent tries to help the child gain self-control. After the child is calm, talk about why that behavior is wrong. Talk about what to do the next time the child gets angry. This helps the child to plan appropriate behavior, and instances of losing control will be much fewer.

## See How Much You Have Learned!

Which discipline method is appropriate in the following situations? Place a check in the proper columns.

	Redirect	Ignore	Be Firm
Johnny, age 4, wants to play with his brother's tool set. Bart will not let him and they argue.			
Terry, age 18 months, is fascinated by the building his sister makes with blocks. You know they will fight if Terry knocks down the tower.			
Diego loves the outdoors and has learned how to unlock the screen door.			
Sarah and Julie are playing dolls and each of them wants to use the doll buggy.			
Satchel is fascinated by the buttons on the TV and the VCR.			
Tonya, age 6, has a reading assignment but is watching TV instead.			

If you want to learn more about guiding your children, contact your County Cooperative Extension Office and ask for the video #VT 356 *Catch 'em Being Good*.

## Responses to Misbehavior

- Use positive discipline methods to respond to misbehavior. Help the child learn how to behave. Create a happy atmosphere.
- Divert the child's attention from behavior you do not want to an appealing, appropriate activity.
- Let children settle their own arguments unless they could get hurt.
- Be firm about behavior you feel strongly about.
- Detach. Imagine you are the child's neighbor, uncle, or aunt.
- Hold a child who completely loses self-control. This protects the child and others until the child is calm.

### Practice Exercises

- Count the number of times children quarrel and fight with each other for three days. Write down what you did and what happened.

	Number of Fights	What You Did	What Happened
1st Day			
2nd Day			
3rd Day			

- After completing the first assignment, try ignoring your children's arguments and quarrels for one week. Keep a record of the number of fights and what happened.
- Choose one behavior problem and take action.

### For Further Reading

Ames, L. (1992). *Raising Good Kids: A developmental approach to discipline*. New York: Dell Paperback.

Bavolek, L. (1994). *Red, White and Bruises: Spanking in the U.S.A. What to do Instead*. Park City, UT: Family Nurturing Center, Inc. 1-800-688-5822.

Nelson, J., L. Lott, and H.S. Glenn. (1993). *Positive Discipline A-Z: 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publications.

### References

Dodson, F. (1987). *How to discipline effectively: Strategies for motivating positive behavior*. In E. Shiff [Ed] Experts Advise Parents. NY: Delacorte Press.

Gartrell, D. (1997). Beyond discipline to guidance. *Young Children*, 52 (6) 34-42.

Whipple, E.E. and C.A. Richey, "Crossing the Line from Physical Discipline to Child Abuse: How Much is Too Much?", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 212 no. 7, July 1997, pp. 617-630.

## A Record of My Discipline Practices and Their Effects\*

Complete this exercise one week after studying *Response to Misbehavior*. Check the blanks that apply to you.

1. The way I usually disciplined this week was:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Compare one child with another
- \_\_\_\_\_ Explain reasons calmly
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ignore misbehavior
- \_\_\_\_\_ Isolate the child from others
- \_\_\_\_\_ Let the child make choices and experience consequences
- \_\_\_\_\_ Praise
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prevent misbehavior before it occurs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remove privileges
- \_\_\_\_\_ Scold
- \_\_\_\_\_ Shame the child
- \_\_\_\_\_ Show disapproval
- \_\_\_\_\_ Spank
- \_\_\_\_\_ Threaten and not follow through
- \_\_\_\_\_ Threaten and follow through
- \_\_\_\_\_ Yell and scream

2. During the past week I:

	More	Less	Same
Acted calmly	_____	_____	_____
Acted firmly with kindness	_____	_____	_____
Let my child learn from consequences	_____	_____	_____
Used kind words	_____	_____	_____
Used unkind words	_____	_____	_____

3. The atmosphere in our home has changed to one of:

	More	Less	Same
Confusion	_____	_____	_____
Cooperation	_____	_____	_____
Friendliness	_____	_____	_____
Fun	_____	_____	_____
Hostility	_____	_____	_____
Tension	_____	_____	_____
Understanding	_____	_____	_____

\* Adapted from *Practical Education for Parenting* by Kent G. Hamdorf, Extension Specialist, Human Relations Family Development, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1978.

### The Discipline for Young Children Series

Most parents mention discipline as their main child-rearing problem. To assist parents, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service offers this series of lessons for home study or discussion sessions. The series helps parents recognize their own strengths and select techniques which seem right to them.

- T-2324 - A Look At Discipline
- T-2325 - Why Children Misbehave
- T-2326 - To Prevent Misbehavior
- T-2327 - Responses to Misbehavior
- T-2328 - Encouraging Self Control
- T-2329 - Discipline Without Punishment

## The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

### *Bringing the University to You!*

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

OSU extends credit to Betsy Schenck, former extension specialist, child development, Virginia State University, for the initial development of this series and to Patricia S. Tweedie, Debi Lawson and Vicki Ehlers for content revisions.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices, or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 0607