



Discipline and Your Child

How do you help your child learn how to behave? What do you do when your child does not listen to you?

Here is general guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics on effective discipline. (Information applies to all sexes and genders; however, for easier reading, pronouns such as she are used in this publication.)

The Difference Between Discipline and Punishment

Many parents think discipline and punishment are the same thing, but they are quite different.

- **Discipline** is simply how we help a child learn how to behave. At the core, effective and healthy discipline begins with teaching good behavior and letting your child know when she does well.
- **Punishment** is negative—something unpleasant that happens when rules are broken. Punishment, a small part of discipline, corrects a child's misbehaviors without resorting to hitting or shaming.

Start Early

You may not realize it, but you help your child learn good behavior from the time she is born. For example, when you respond to your baby's cries, your baby learns that you are there, that you can be counted on, and that she can trust you. Your responses teach your child all about love.

Once your baby starts to crawl and walk, safety is a critical discipline issue. Creating a safe environment is the first step. For example, keep household chemicals, such as detergent, medicine, and fragile items, out of your child's reach. Taking this simple step makes it easier to limit how often you need to make things off-limits.

Extra supervision is also important during this stage. For example, if your child tries to touch a hot stove, pick her up; firmly say, "No, hot"; and offer her a toy to play with instead. She may not understand you at first, but after a few weeks, she will learn.

At about 18 months of age, your child will try to learn the rules. This means, of course, that she will test limits, especially when it's a new rule. It may even seem that your child breaks rules on purpose. However, by breaking rules, your child actually learns what the rules mean.

If you keep the rules consistent, your child will have an easier time learning. Decide what the rules will be and stick to them. Explain the rules in a simple way your child can understand. After you say, "No," explain what your child is expected to do instead. For example, "No, hot. Stay away from the stove." You can also continue to offer distractions. Remember that one of your jobs as a parent is to prevent your child from harm and make sure that there is no harm to others.

How to Prevent Power Struggles

Here are tips that may help you prevent power struggles with your child.

- **Be aware of what your child can and cannot do.** Children develop at different rates. They have different strengths and weaknesses. When your child misbehaves, it may be that she simply cannot do what you are asking or she does not understand what you expect her to do.

Spanking and harsh words are harmful and don't work. Here's why.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) policy statement "Effective Discipline to Raise Healthy Children" highlights why it's important to focus on teaching good behavior rather than punishing bad behavior. Research shows that spanking, slapping, and other forms of physical punishment don't work well to correct a child's behavior. The same holds true for yelling at or shaming a child. Beyond being ineffective, harsh physical and verbal punishments can also damage a child's long-term physical and mental health.

- **The unhealthy cycle of spanking.** The AAP advises that parents and caregivers should not spank or hit children. Instead of teaching responsibility and self-control, spanking often increases aggression and anger in children. A study of children born in 20 large US cities revealed that families who used physical punishment got caught in a negative cycle: the more children were spanked, the more they later misbehaved, which prompted more spankings in response. The effects of spanking may also be felt beyond the parent-child relationship, because it teaches that causing someone pain is OK if you're frustrated—even with those you love. Children who are spanked may be more likely to hit others when they don't get what they want.
- **Lasting changes.** Physical punishment increases the risk of injury, especially among children younger than 18 months, and may leave other measurable marks on the brain and body. Children who are spanked show higher levels of hormones tied to toxic stress. Physical punishment may also affect brain development. One study revealed that young adults who were spanked as children repeatedly used less of the part of the brain involved with self-control. They also had lower IQ test scores as young adults than the control group.
- **Words hurt.** Yelling at children and using words to cause emotional pain or shame has also been found to be ineffective and harmful. Harsh verbal discipline, even by parents who are otherwise warm and loving, can lead to more misbehaviors of and mental health problems in children. Research shows that harsh verbal discipline, which becomes more common as children get older, may lead to more behavioral problems and symptoms of depression in teens. Remember, statements such as "Look at this room—I know you can do better!" communicate both love and correction and are much more effective than "You're a slob!"

- **Pay attention to your child's feelings.** For example, tell your child, "I know you are feeling sad that your friend is leaving, but you still have to pick up your toys." Watch for times when misbehaviors have a pattern, such as when your child is feeling jealous. Talk with your child about this rather than just giving consequences.

- **Offer choices when you can.** This helps set limits and still allows your child some independence. For example, say, "Would you like to wear the red shirt or the blue one?"
- **Make a game out of good behavior.** Your child is more likely to learn if you make it fun. For example, say, "Let's have a race and see who can put their coat on first."
- **Plan ahead.** If you know that certain events or outings always cause trouble, prepare your child. Ahead of time, explain expected behavior and what will happen if she misbehaves. Make sure to notice if she listens to your suggestions and does what is expected.
- **Praise good behavior.** When your child is being good, tell her! It does not have to be complicated—simply say, "Thank you for coming right away," and hug your child. Do this often, especially when your child is very young.
- **Teach all the steps.** Instructions and praise that are vague don't help a child know what she needs to do. Instead, point out a specific behavior. For example, say, "Please pick up all the clothes on your bedroom floor and put them into the basket," instead of, "Please clean up your room."
- **Use statements, not questions.** Stating a rule as a question may seem polite, but it allows your child to say no. It's best to say what you mean and stick to it. For example, say, "It's time to put your toys away," instead of, "Would you like to put your toys away now?" Offering choices such as "Put the toys in the box or in a bag" lets your child feel in charge while doing what you want her to do.
- **Agree on the rules.** It is important for parents and caregivers to agree on rules and discipline. If you disagree, talk about it when you are not with your child. Young children can get confused when parents and other adults have different rules. Also, try to make sure that your rules stay the same from day to day. If the rules are always the same, they are easy to learn. Children can get confused when there are too many changes.

What to Do When Your Child Does Not Listen

Of course, you cannot avoid trouble all the time. Sooner or later, your child will test you. It is your child's way of finding out what the limits really are.

When your child does not listen, try the following approaches:

- **Natural consequences.** These are the times when you need to let your child see what will happen if she does not behave (as long as it does not place her into any danger). For example, if your child keeps dropping her cookies on purpose, she will soon have no more cookies left to eat. If she throws and breaks her toy, she will not be able to play with it. When you use this method, don't give in and rescue your child (by giving her more cookies, for example). Your child will learn best when she learns for herself. It will not be long before she learns the natural consequences.
- **Logical consequences.** These are the times when you will need to step in and create a consequence. For example, tell her that if she does not pick up her toys, you will put them away for the rest of the day. Or you may say, "The toys need to be put away, so we can do this together a few times. Soon, you will be able to do it by yourself." When you use this method, it is important that you mean what you say. Be prepared to follow through right away. Don't yell—just be firm and respond in a calm way. Another example that occurs often is that young children (2–4 years of age) will often spill the milk or another liquid onto the floor while looking directly at their parent. Many parents will ask, "Did you spill milk?" or yell at their child, and their child will often say, "No." You may say in a strong voice, "You spilled

the milk. It messes up the floor, so please do not do that again. Here are some towels. You and I will clean it up." It is OK to model behavior as long as your child joins you in fixing the problem.

- **Withholding privileges.** This is when you tell your child that if she does not cooperate, she will have to give up something she likes. Here are a few things to keep in mind when you use this technique.
 - Never take away something your child truly needs, such as a food.
 - Choose something that your child values that is related to the misbehavior.
 - For children younger than 6 or 7 years, withholding privileges works best if done right away. For example, if your child misbehaves in the morning, do not tell her she can't watch TV that evening. There is too much time in between, and she will probably not connect the behavior with the consequence.
 - Be sure you can follow through on taking away the privilege if your child doesn't cooperate.
- **Time-out, or cooling down.** This is a technique that works well when a specific rule has been broken. It works best for children 2 to 5 years of age and can be used throughout childhood. Follow these steps to make a time-out, or cooling down period, work.
 1. **Set the rules ahead of time.** Decide which 2 or 3 behaviors will cause you to implement time-out and explain this to your child. You may have to repeat this often.
 2. **Choose a time-out spot.** This should be a boring place with no distractions, such as a chair. Remember, the main goal is to separate a child and allow her to pause and cool off. (Keep in mind that bathrooms can be dangerous and bedrooms should be a safe place for sleeping, not a punishment.)
 3. **Start the time-out.** Give your child one warning unless the behavior is aggression. If it happens again, send her to the time-out spot right away. Tell her what she did wrong in as few words and with as little emotion as possible. 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. Then, without eye contact, say, "You are here because you have to have a time-out." Do not discuss the time-out any further. Do not respond to pleas, promises, questions, excuses, or outbursts. It should take only a couple of time-outs before she learns to cooperate and will choose to sit quietly.
 4. **Set a time limit.** Once your child can sit quietly, set a timer so that she will know when the time-out is over. 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 often work. If fussing starts, restart the timer. Wait until your child is quiet before you set the timer again. Or tell your child she can come out of time-out when she is ready to behave better.
 5. **Resume activity.** When the time is up, help your child return to play. Do not lecture or ask for apologies. Remind her that you love her. If you need to discuss her behavior, wait until later to do so.
- **Child's solution and choice.** This is a technique that puts your child in the position of being responsible. It teaches your child that she can make better choices. This technique also places any consequence you choose into an action plan.
 1. **Have a conversation with your child.** Ask 2 questions. First ask, "I see that you (describe what you saw happen)." Your child will be amazed you are not angry and be curious about what comes next. Second ask, "I think you did this because (describe your best guess, which is usually right, about why your child did this)."

2. **Ask your child what she could do if the situation occurs again.** This is the heart of the teaching moment because your child is now part of the solution. It's important to not say anything after you ask this question. Let your child ponder the question, let her weigh the options, and let her come up with a solution. This process does more to teach a rule than any consequence—it makes the problem and solution owned by your child and not you.
3. **Create a visual reminder.** Write down key misbehaviors on a piece of paper or poster. You can draw pictures if you want to. Then create a diagram with 2 paths. One path is if your child chooses her *better* idea, and the other is if the rule is broken, leading to a consequence you and your child agree to. If your child repeats the misbehavior, you can point to the poster and say, very neutrally, "I see you chose this path." The visual reminder shows your child that it is her choice and not your choice.

Lead by Example

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

If you do not handle a situation well the first time, try not to worry about it. Think about what you could have done differently, and try to 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. Be sure to keep your promise. This gives your child a good model of how to recover from mistakes.

Remember

Keep in mind that teaching children good behavior takes time, patience, and a loving attitude. Every child is different and parents can figure out what discipline technique works with their child. There may be times when nothing you do seems to work, so it's important to remind yourself you haven't failed. Pediatricians talk with parents about child behavior all the time. If you have questions or concerns about your child's behavior, write them down and bring the list to your child's next doctor visit. However, if you need help sooner, call your child's doctor before your child's next doctor visit.

From Your Doctor



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