

About Discipline - Helping Children Develop Self-Control

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by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D. & Anita Gurian, Ph.D.

Introduction

All children misbehave at some time. They may throw tantrums, test the rules, start fights, refuse to cooperate with family routines, use bad language - the list goes on. As parents teach children appropriate behavior, key issues to consider are the age of the child, the goals of discipline and the attitude and style of the parents.

Real life stories

Jimmy, aged 2 1/2, throws himself on the floor and sobs when he's not allowed to eat potato chips before lunch. Should his mother let him have the potato chips, ignore him, or hug him and try to calm him down?

Esther, aged 6, has learned some curse words and uses them in a loud voice when she's in a store with her father, causing him considerable embarrassment. Should he take her out of the store, wash her mouth with soap, or smile and pretend she didn't do anything wrong?

Marcia, aged 12, refuses to make her bed, stating that her room is her territory and it's her right to keep it the way she pleases. Should her parents agree with her, take away her allowance, or set up some house rules?

Steve, at 16, wants to attend an all-night party after the prom. Should his parents permit him to go, refuse to let him go, discuss their concerns with him, make some arrangements for supervision?

Discipline: a closer look

The foundations for discipline and for helping children develop self-control are laid down in the early years. During the first year of life, establishing a trusting relationship with the baby is critical and sets the climate for parent/child interactions through the years. Sometime between the ages of 1 and 2, the person previously thought of as a baby suddenly bursts onto the scene as a full-fledged person with very specific wants and needs. As toddlers begin to move around and to test their independence, they need to be helped to understand what is safe, what they can and cannot do. Since they do not yet understand the idea of consequences, a gentle but firm "no" is in order. With the explosion of new skills - talking, walking - toddlers may appear to understand the rules and can be reasoned with at times, but are not yet really ready to control their actions. When a child is overtired or overwhelmed the resultant frustration may take the form of a tantrum. Self control is a process which develops slowly, and the goal of discipline is to help children build their own self-control, not to have them merely obey adult commands.

Flexibility is the key to discipline as children grow. Although the situations change, there are some basic guidelines that help parents understand how to discipline any age child - the 2-year-old who will not put on his coat before leaving the house, the 8-year-old who will not turn off the television, or the 15-year-old who pleads to stay out all night.

What to do

Have the right attitude. First and foremost, parents should realize (and believe) that disciplining a child is not bad; it's necessary. In many instances discipline is necessary to keep children out of danger and help them with situations they are not yet ready to handle because of their age, intelligence, or ability. Through discipline a child learns how to behave, to respect the rights of others, and to follow rules. Children misbehave for a number of reasons. They may simply want to do something else, they may not fully understand what parents mean, they may want to show their independence or feel contrary. A child's behavior is a form of communication that needs to be interpreted and understood.

Use language to help solve problems. Establish fair, simple rules and state them clearly. When children acquire language, help them use words, rather than actions, to express how they feel. Similarly, when you are disciplining your child, tell her that you understand what she is feeling. After the preschool years a child is able and interested in understanding behavior.

For example, a 7-year-old may hit her younger brother when he grabbed her toy. In the child's world, it's difficult to have a younger sibling messing with your things. So, accompany the discipline with a statement that tells her you know how annoying it can be to have someone getting in the way, but she is not allowed to hit. Help your child practice identifying and saying what she feels before she acts. With older children, help them work out a way to handle difficult situations. You might pose situations such as "How can you let Amanda know that you don't like it when she doesn't let you have a turn?" You might suggest some ideas and encourage the child to generate some possible solutions.

Negotiate. Negotiation does not mean parents or children get their way. When done with sensitivity, negotiation makes everyone feel part of the solution to a problem. Even young children like to feel they have a choice rather than that they are being forced into something. Think carefully about the choices you offer before starting the negotiations. Insisting that your child take his bad-tasting liquid antibiotics can set the stage for a conflict. However, giving the choice of taking the medicine with a juice pack or a milkshake encourages cooperation. But proceed with caution and choose your words carefully. Only give the child a choice when he truly has one. Don't ask a 4-year-old if she wants to go to the doctor if a doctor visit is necessary. But do ask her to choose what snack to take or what to wear.

Pick your battles. Some issues just aren't worth the fight. Discipline doesn't mean that parents always win. You may feel as if you're giving in, but there are times when you should decide if what your child is carrying on about is worth the fuss. Obviously, destroying a toy on purpose is more serious and requires a direct response when compared to prolonging play time in the bathtub. Parents should prioritize and decide what's important. For example, parents can be more strict about honesty than about cleaning up a room. It's reasonable to set a curfew for a 15-year-old, but it's probably not worth fighting about what clothes she wears as long as they fit your rules of

Time out. When it works it really works! Time out is time honored for good reason. Time out teaches the child that for every action there is a reaction. Specifically, time out provides two important objectives: it immediately stops unwanted behavior and it gives the child (and parent) a necessary cooling-off period. The general rule of thumb is to start time out immediately after the incident or behavior and have a designated spot for the time out. The number of minutes the child is in time out should be generally equivalent to his age; thus the 5-year-old is in time out for five minutes. Some children may need to be held during the time out to stay, and physically feel, in control, and some children may be too scared about being alone to have this technique work. Time out can be useful but it is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. Parents must guard against its overuse and realize other forms of discipline may work better, depending on the child and/or the incident.

Ignoring. For some infractions, the simple act of ignoring the behavior will make it disappear. Some children misbehave as a way of getting attention, and parents may unwittingly encourage the behavior they are trying to stop. By repeatedly telling your child to stop blowing bubbles into his milk or to stop playing with her food you may be really calling attention to the behavior, turning it into an event. Ignore it and attend to something else and then focus attention on the child when she does the right thing. You might describe the expected positive behavior and ignore the inappropriate behavior. Then, as soon as the right behavior appears, comment on it. The point is - recognize and attend to behavior you want to encourage rather than behavior you don't want to encourage.

Rewards. Positive reinforcement is the best technique for encouraging wanted behavior. There is no question that people are more motivated to do the right thing in order to get a reward and to avoid punishment. Rewards are not bribes, they are ways to show a child that she is doing a good job. The reward should be tailored to the age and tastes of the child as well as to the resources of the parent. Although stickers are often used to encourage new or improved behavior, don't underestimate the value of time. A special trip to the playground or an extra story at bedtime is often all it takes to motivate the child to do a better job. Most children typically crave attention and acceptance from their parents and will work to get it.

Natural consequences. Parents always have the option of using natural consequences to drive home a point. Natural consequences help children learn to take responsibility for their actions and help parents realize that the long term gain will be worth the short term discomfort. For example, the 8-year-old who is refusing to eat what you made for dinner and expecting a private catered meal can be told to eat what is offered or nothing. One night without a full meal will not deprive the child nutritionally in the long run, but it will teach him that there are limits to dinner behavior. Similarly, the 10-year-old who forgot to bring home her social studies book and is unprepared for the quiz may want you to write a note that she was sick all night. Refusing to do this teaches the child to plan better next time and not to expect that her parents will lie to bail her out.

No more no. Both parents and children get tired of hearing "no" all the time. Too many no's lose their meaning. Saying

"no" doesn't help a child learn what will get her a "yes." Parents have to work especially hard to frame things in the positive rather than the negative. Positive statements teach children what is appropriate. It is not enough to tell a child what not to do, you should also teach them a better alternative. If your five-year-old is happily and busily coloring with crayon on your wall, it's more effective to give him paper, perhaps in different sizes and shapes set aside in a separate box just for art supplies, and say something like "walls are not meant for drawing, but paper is perfect. And when you use paper you can draw as many pictures as you want and I can save them." Parents should develop a radar system to pick up the good behavior rather than just the bad. Catch children when they are sharing, helping other children, dealing well with frustration, and compliment them immediately. You may be surprised when you try a one-day experiment when you look for, and praise, all the good behavior you can find.

Prevention. With time, parents get to know their child's trouble spots. Then prevention is in order. For example, if every time you go to the grocery store your 4-year-old cries and begs you to buy her various items on all the shelves, devise a plan before you go. You might give her an empty box of an item you want to buy and have her help you hunt for it. Perhaps you can also tell her you will stop at the library, or plan some other treat, if she helps you. Preparing children in advance for a change from one activity or environment to another helps them manage the transition.

What doesn't work. Discipline is not a synonym for punishment. Discipline means showing children positive alternatives and an opportunity to see how their actions affect others. Discipline teaches children to share and cooperate, to learn to handle their anger and to feel successful and in control of themselves. When children are punished, they learn only what not to do. Their behavior is controlled through fear and their feelings are not respected.

Although some parents spank their children, most feel guilty afterwards. There is good reason to question spanking as a helpful technique. Studies confirm that children who are treated aggressively physically will grow up to be aggressive. Thus the potential for the cycle of abuse to repeat itself through the generations is increased. Another main reason that spanking is not a recommended form of discipline is that it can backfire. Imagine this: A 7-year-old hits a 4-year-old. A parent rushes in and hits the offender. What did the children learn from this scenario? It taught the children to hit when they are mad, exactly the opposite of what the parent intended to teach. Children are masters of imitation and look to their parents as models. So when hitting is used for discipline, parents risk having the child model that behavior; they learn to hit, just like

Warning signs

By first or second grade, children have outgrown full-blown temper tantrums. They may, however, still be difficult to discipline. Check things out with a professional if your child is doing dangerous or risky things that you can't stop, if he's being aggressive with others, or if she is disrespectful of people or property. Parents should also seek outside help if there are changes in behavior or if there are physical signs associated with the tantrum or bad behavior, such as headaches, clinging behavior, or poor eating. Any medical or psychological causes for the behavior should be identified and addressed as soon as possible.

A basic principle can never be stated often enough: at any age, parents should separate out the person and the action. It is essential to remind a child that it is the behavior that is disliked but the child is still loved. Despite all the advice and good intentions, children and parents will still have meltdowns. Keeping blowups in perspective, preparing for them, and having some strategies for dealing with them will help everyone manage crises.

Questions & answers

Can I spoil my baby if I pick her up every time she cries?

Infants can be trying for parents because their needs are so constant. Babies don't purposely challenge their parents, they are just unable to take care of their own needs. Feeding infants, changing them, playing with them and distracting them all build a strong, secure parent-child bond. Especially in the first three months, responding to the baby's cries makes him or her feel safe, not spoiled. Between 3 and 6 months parents are usually better able to differentiate a child's cries and know when to rush in and when a cry will fade on its own.

My 10-month old just learned to walk and gets into everything. I'm afraid he'll get hurt. What can I do?

Although a child of 6 to 12 months of age is beginning to understand and use some language, they do not have a full

understanding of the world around them. When you see a child doing something unsafe, firmly say "no" and if necessary physically remove him. For example, if he is touching something hot, tell them "no" and move him away. It also helps to distract him and give him something else to do.

I've tried everything, but my 4-year-old still misbehaves. What am I doing wrong?

Sometimes misbehavior results from a combination of a child being willful and a parent being ineffective in his/her approach. However, a child's behavior problems may signal some other problem. For example, your child may be frustrated due to a language problem, or have difficulty with emotional regulation, or even have experienced some trauma. A professional can help you decide if it's a developmental or a parenting problem.

My 10-year-old constantly challenges me when I ask about her homework, but I think she's not doing it.

Children appreciate being trusted and respected by their parents. But it's a tough lesson to learn that getting respect requires giving it - which goes for parents and children alike. In addition, school age children need to learn about cause and effect, and the positive and negative consequences of behavior. They also need to develop some independence. Homework is a typical proving ground on all these fronts. You should set up a reasonable routine for doing and reviewing the homework, taking in account everyone's preference for time, place and checking. Once the ground rules are decided, parents should give their children a chance to come through. Be patient if the child has to experience a bad quiz grade to understand what happens if study time is cut short. Grades and teacher reports should help a parent check on progress. If trouble with academics is brewing, parents should certainly step in and have the problem evaluated. The earlier that learning or emotional issues are addressed, the better the outcome.

How can I get my 16-year-old to abide by his curfew?

It's normal for teens to be more involved with their peers than with their parents. Alliance with peers is a necessary step as teens create an identity for themselves, become more independent, and prepare to leave home. Teens still appreciate limits and still need to know what their parents think, although they may not always act as if they do. The usual discipline techniques targeted for younger children, can still be used but need to be adapted for the older child. It is still appropriate for parents to set limits on behavior and define consequences for that behavior, appropriate to the child's age. Also, the more forbidden a parent makes something, the more appealing it may become. With teenagers, parents must explain the reasons for their decisions and encourage a dialogue whenever possible. It is also important for parents to acknowledge and listen to their teens' thoughts and have them feel that they're understood. Discipline in the teen years is not just about rules, it's about youngsters learning values, trying on adult behavior and accepting responsibility.

About the Authors

Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D., Clinical Associate Professor, NYU School of Medicine is the project Director of www.AboutOurKids.org. She is also co-editor of *Childhood Revealed: Art Expressing Pain, Discovery and Hope* and frequent contributor to national television and print media.

Anita Gurian, Ph.D., Clinical Assistant Professor, NYU School of Medicine, is Associate Editor of the NYU Child Study Center Letter and Executive Editor of www.AboutOurKids.org. She is also the author of several books for parents and professionals.