

About Discipline - Helping Children Develop Self-Control

Introduction

All children misbehave at some time; it's part of finding out what appropriate behavior is and where the limits are. Children 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, what the expected rules and boundaries are all about, it's important to remember the goals of discipline. Discipline means helping a child develop self control and a sense of limits, experience the consequences of his/her behavior, and learn from his/her mistakes. Discipline does not mean punishment or conflict between parent and child. All children need the security of knowing the rules and boundaries of behavior; without them they feel at a loss.

Real Life Stories

Alex, aged 2 ½, throws himself on the floor and screams when he wants cookies before eating his dinner. Should his mother let him have the cookies, ignore him, or distract him?

Eloise, aged 6, has learned some curse words and uses them in a loud voice to her father, when he won't buy the cereal she has seen advertised. Should he take her out of the store, wash her mouth with soap, or smile and pretend she didn't do anything wrong?

Naomi, 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, set up some rules, or take away her allowance?

Rafey, 17, wants to attend an all-night party after the high school 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 developmental look

Flexibility is the key to discipline as children grow. Parents must be prepared to modify their discipline approach over time, using different strategies as their child develops greater independence and capacity for self regulation and responsibility.

The foundations for discipline are laid down in the early years. During the first year of life, as parents establish a trusting relationship with their baby, they set the climate for parent/child interactions through the years. Sometime between the ages of 1 and 2, the individual 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 they test their independence, and they need to be helped to understand what is safe, what they can and cannot do. Focused with their own needs, toddlers are not concerned with the interests of others. 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 they are not yet really ready to control their actions. Preschoolers understand rules, and their behavior is guided by these rules and their increasing awareness of consequences of their behavior. As children reach school age, they understand the reasons for rules; the rules become internalized and are accompanied by an increasing sense of responsibility and self control. Most school age children are sensitive to the notion of fairness and justice and are able to weigh the needs of others as they make decisions. During adolescence, the individuals become responsible for their own behavior.

Establishing self control is a process which develops slowly, and the ultimate goal of discipline is to help children build their own self-control, not to have them merely obey adult commands.

What parents can do

If you want considerate, cooperative, and flexible children, you should be their model.

Think about your style of discipline

Parents discipline their children in various ways. Researchers have identified the three most common parenting styles: authoritarian/strict, authoritative/moderate and permissive.

- An authoritarian, or *extremely strict*, parent controls a child's behavior and attitude by stressing obedience to authority and discouraging discussion. Extremely strict parents often rely on punishment.
- An authoritative, or *moderate*, parent sets limits and relies on natural and logical consequences for children to learn from making their own mistakes. The parent explains why rules are important and why they must be followed. Authoritative parents reason with their children and consider the children's point of view even though they might not agree with them. They are firm, with kindness, warmth and love. They set high standards and encourage their children to be independent.
- A permissive, or *indulgent*, parent exerts minimal control. Children are allowed to set their own rules and schedules and activities. Permissive parents do not demand the high levels of behavior as authoritarian and authoritative parents.

How do children raised by these types of parents grow up? Follow-up studies show that the moderate way, between extreme permissiveness and extreme strictness, is the most effective of the three styles. Children raised by authoritative/moderate parents tended to have a good self concept and to be responsible, cooperative, self-reliant and intellectually curious. Children raised by authoritarian/strict parents tended to be timid and withdrawn, less intellectually curious and dependent on the voice of authority. Children raised by permissive parents tended to be immature, reluctant to accept responsibility or to show independence. Following are some helpful discipline techniques:

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's 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 grabs her toy. In the child's world, it's difficult to have a younger sibling messing with your stuff. So, accompany the discipline with a statement that tells her you know how annoying it can be to have someone getting in your way, but she is not allowed to hit. Help her practice identifying and saying what she feels before she acts. You might pose situations such as "How can you tell Amanda that you don't like it when she doesn't let you have a turn?" You might also suggest some other situations and encourage the child to generate some possible solutions to the situation.

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. 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. Most children crave attention and acceptance from their parents and will work to get it. 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. Verbal praise can be effective. 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.

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 10-year-old who forgot to bring home her social studies book and is unprepared for a quiz may want you to write a note that she was sick. 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 - keep it positive

Both parents and children get tired of hearing 'no' all the time. Too many no's lose their meaning and don't help a child learn what will get her a 'yes.' Positive statements teach children what is appropriate. It is not enough to tell a child what not to do; you should also teach a better alternative. If your five-year-old is happily and busily coloring with crayon on the wall, it's more effective to give him paper, perhaps in different sizes and shapes in a 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. Try a one-day experiment and you'll be surprised at all the good behavior you'll find.

Don't **dictate:** **negotiate**

Negotiation does not mean that that parents or children get their way. Negotiation, when done with sensitivity, 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 medicine can set the stage for conflict. However, giving him the choice of taking the medicine with a juice pack or a milkshake encourages cooperation. But proceed with caution and choose your words carefully. Give the child a choice only 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 hassle. 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 decency.

Prevention

With time, parents get to know their child's trouble spots, and then prevention is in order. For example, if every time you go to the supermarket your 4-year-old begs you to buy her various items, 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.

Dealing with unacceptable behavior - 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. A basic principle to remember: parents should separate out the child and the action. It is essential to remind a child that it is the behavior that is disliked, but the child is still loved.

- Be clear, firm and specific about what you mean.
- Be respectful. Don't resort to name-calling or yelling.
- The consequence should follow the behavior immediately. The consequence should be fair in relation to the behavior.
- 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 achieves 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 benefit from this technique.

What doesn't work

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 an effective 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? They learned that it's okay to hit when they're mad, exactly the opposite of what the parent intended to teach. Children are masters of imitation and look to their parents as models. What's the effect of hitting? The children learn to hit, just like the mom and dad.

When to seek help

Check things out with a professional if your child is doing dangerous or risky things that you can't stop, if he's overly aggressive with others, or is disrespectful of people or property. Parents should also seek consultation if there are changes in behavior or if there are physical signs, such as headaches, or poor eating/sleeping. Any medical or psychological causes for unacceptable behavior should be identified and addressed as soon as possible.

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