

# Discipline and Your Child



As a parent, one of your jobs is to teach your child how to behave. While this can take time, try not to get frustrated when your child does not behave. Instead, learn effective ways to discipline your child. The following is guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics on how to discipline your child.

## Discipline versus punishment

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

- **Discipline** is a positive teaching tool based on caring, praise, and instructions for good behavior.
- **Punishment** is negative; something unpleasant that happens when rules are broken. Punishment should be only a very small part of discipline.

## Start early

You may not realize it, but you actually begin teaching your child good behavior from the time your child is born. For example, when you respond to your infant's cries, you are teaching her that you are there, that you can be counted on, and that she can trust you.

Once your baby starts to crawl and walk, safety is the most critical discipline issue. This means that certain things must be off-limits. Extra supervision is important during this time. 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 children start to test their limits. They want to see what they can get away with, especially when it's a new rule. It may even seem that your child breaks rules on purpose. So decide what the rules will be and stick to them. Explain the rules in a way your child can understand.

## Tips to avoid trouble

To avoid power struggles with your child, address only those issues that truly are important to you. The following tips may help:

- **Offer choices when you can.** This helps you set limits and still allows your child some independence. For example, try saying, "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 do what you want if you make it fun. For example say, "Let's have a race and see who can put his coat on first."
- **Plan ahead.** If you know that certain events or outings always cause trouble, talk with your child ahead of time. Explain how you want him to behave and what will happen if he does not obey. Make sure your child is well rested and well fed, and take along a book or small toy to amuse him if he gets bored.

- **Praise good behavior.** When your child is being good, tell him! It does not have to be anything elaborate, simply say, "Thank you for coming right away," and hug your child. Do this often, especially when your child is very young.
- **Focus on a specific behavior.** Instructions and praise that are vague (like "Please clean up your room.") don't help a child know what he needs to do. Instead, point out a *specific* behavior (like "Please pick up all the clothes on your bedroom floor and put them into the basket.>").
- **Use statements, not questions.** Stating a rule as a question may seem polite (like "Would you like to put your toys away now?"), but it allows your child to say no. It's best to say what you mean (like "It's time to put your toys away.") and stick to it. Offering choices (like "Put the toys in the box or in a bag.") lets your child feel in charge while doing what you want him 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. It's confusing to children when parents and other adults have different rules.

## Discipline that works

Of course you cannot avoid trouble all of 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:

- **Natural consequences.** These are the times when you let your child see what will happen if she does not behave (as long as it does not place her in 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. It will not be long before she learns not to drop her cookies and to play carefully with her toys.  
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.
- **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. When you use this method, it is important that you mean what you say. Be prepared to follow through right away. You do not have to yell and scream. Be firm and respond in a calm way.
- **Withholding privileges** is when you tell your child that if she does not cooperate, she will have to give something up she likes. The following are a few things to keep in mind when you use this technique:
  - Never take away something your child truly needs, such as a meal.
  - 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 probably will not connect the behavior with the consequence.
- Be sure you can follow through on your promise.
- **Time-out.** This is a technique that works well when a specific rule has been broken. It works best for children from 2 to 5 years of age, but can be used throughout childhood. Follow these steps to make a time-out 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 the child and allow her to pause and cool off. (Keep in mind that bathrooms can be dangerous and bedrooms may become playgrounds.)
  3. **Start the time-out.** Give your child one warning (unless it 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 but firmly. Then, without eye contact, say, "I am holding you here because you have to have a time-out." Do not discuss it any further. Do not respond to pleas, promises, questions, excuses, or outbursts (such as foul language). It should only take a couple of time-outs before she learns to cooperate and will choose to sit quietly rather than be held down.
  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.
  5. **Resume activity.** When the time is up, help your child return to play. Your child has "served her time." 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.
- **Work toward consistency.** Try to make sure that your rules stay the same from day to day. Children find frequent changes confusing and may push the limits just to find out what the limits are.
- **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 misbehavior has a pattern, like if your child is feeling jealous. Talk with your child about this rather than just giving consequences.
- **Learn from mistakes—including your own.** 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.

### Set an 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.

Even if your children's behavior and values seem to be on the right track, they will still challenge you. It is a natural part of growing up. Children are constantly learning what their limits are, and they need their parents to help them understand those limits. By doing so, parents can help their children feel capable and loved, learn right from wrong, develop good behavior, have a positive approach toward life, and become productive, good citizens.

### Why spanking is not the best choice

The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend spanking. Although most Americans were spanked as children, we now know that it has several important side effects.

- Even though spanking may seem to "work" at first, it loses its impact after a while.
- Because most parents do not want to spank, they are less likely to be consistent.
- Spanking increases aggression and anger instead of teaching responsibility.
- Parents may intend to stay calm but often do not, and then regret their actions later.
- Spanking can lead to physical struggles and even grow to the point of harming the child.

It is true that many adults who were spanked as children may be well-adjusted and caring people today. However, research has shown that, when compared with children who are not spanked, children who are spanked are more likely to become adults who are depressed, use alcohol, have more anger, hit their own children, hit their spouses, and engage in crime and violence. These adult outcomes make sense because spanking teaches a child that causing others pain is OK if you're frustrated or want to maintain control—even with those you love. A child is not likely to see the difference between getting spanked from his parents and hitting a sibling or another child when he doesn't get what he wants.

### Tips to make discipline more effective

You will have days when it seems impossible to get your child to behave. But there are ways to ease frustration and avoid unnecessary conflict 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 he simply cannot do what you are asking or he does not understand what you are asking.
- **Think before you speak.** Once you make a rule or promise, stick to it. So be sure you are being realistic. Think if it is really necessary before saying no.
- **Don't give in.** If your child throws a temper tantrum because he can't have a piece of candy and you give it to him so he will stop, he will learn that this is a way to get what he wants. Do not encourage bad behavior by giving in.

## Your doctor can help

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, don't wait for the next checkup to talk with your pediatrician if you think you have a big problem.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 60,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

American Academy of Pediatrics  
Web site—[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

Copyright © 2009  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
All rights reserved.

## From your doctor

The recommendations in this publication do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate. Original document included as part of *Addressing Mental Health Concerns in Primary Care: A Clinician's Toolkit*. Copyright © 2010 American Academy of Pediatrics. All Rights Reserved. The American Academy of Pediatrics does not review or endorse any modifications made to this document and in no event shall the AAP be liable for any such changes.

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

