

TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT DISCIPLINE AND PROPER BEHAVIOR

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Discipline is not mostly punishment. Discipline is teaching new behaviors--in yourself and your children. Children often do the same troubling things repeatedly because they do not know another way to act or because they do not know how to ask for what they really want or talk about what is bothering them. So, one of the main goals of discipline is to teach them a better way to behave and communicate. Discipline is also preventing misbehavior. These suggestions should help:

The single most important part of discipline is to catch your child being good and let him know how proud you are ("You put on your shoes this morning--way to go!"). Use praise often; it motivates your child to want to behave well and to seek your approval. Every 5 to 10 minutes, try to catch your toddler being good, every 15 minutes or so for preschoolers, and every 30 minutes or so with older children.

Spend some time every day doing things your child likes to do and that you like to do. A child who has special attention from her parents is less likely to misbehave.

Childproof your house. Remove dangerous, breakable, and valuable objects from areas where you spend time with your young child so that constant nagging is not necessary. If possible, make your yard as safe and child-friendly as possible--get a fence, give away a dangerous dog, move lawn chemicals and equipment. If you cannot make changes in your yard or play area, take turns with other parents supervising children outside.

Anticipate children's needs for activities. Have a list of things your child likes to do (you can create this together). When he is restless, or needs a new activity, go to the list and let him chose something. When driving long distances, even on the way to and from the grocery store, have some fun activities prepared like "I see something...", "20 Questions", drawing pads or books that are only for use in the car or bus.

Rotate your child's toys. Keep some in a closet out of your child's reach and somewhere she can play with them. When she needs a new activity and is tired of the toys she has out, switch them with one of the ones in the closet.

Distract young children from things you do not want them doing by starting another activity--getting out a different toy, reading a book with them, singing a song, etc.

Praise your child when she does something you expect her to do. Make a short list of things you want your child to do on her own. Put these on a chart (with older children you can also list the days of the week and hours of the day). With younger children, every 30 minutes or so, go with him to the chart and draw a star or put a sticker on it if he has done what was required. For older children, two or three times a day may be enough. You can mention a few minutes in advance that it is almost chart time--as a reminder to do what he should.

In a playful way, practice how you want your child to behave. Try saying "Now we are going to play 'The Obey Game'. I am going to ask you to do something and then when you do it, I am going to give you a big hug. Are you ready? O.K., go get your shoes!" When your child returns with his shoes say, "That was very good obeying. I am proud of you. Here is your hug. Now, let's obey Daddy again." You can also use this to practice social skills like taking turns, waiting patiently, and so forth.

Have family time for talking about behavior. Let your children talk about why rules are important, what the rules should be, rewards, and consequences. Children are more likely to agree and cooperate when they understand and are involved in rulemaking.

Take time for yourself: You will do better with your children when you are refreshed. If you have given your child special time, it is easier to insist on your own special time, too.

Even if you do all of the activities listed above often and well, children will misbehave at times. These suggestions should help you manage problem behavior:

For older children, use natural consequences whenever possible and safe. For example, if you have to nag your child to get dressed for school every morning, let her know you will be taking her whether she is dressed or not. When the time comes, walk her out to the bus or car in her pajamas and let her get dressed in the car or on the bus.

When your preschooler keeps doing something you have asked him not to do, give one warning and then take a "time out." Put your child in another room for a few minutes (only a few minutes is needed) and give him no attention. With older children, use a "reverse time out." Say, "I can't be around you when you act like this. I'll be back when you can behave." Do not respond to pounding on the door, etc. Come out when he is behaving appropriately. Then practice with your child the behavior you want to see. Another way to do this is to have a time out chair that your child must sit in briefly until he is ready to behave better.

Sometimes parents do not practice good discipline methods for enough time. When you have tried several methods and nothing seems to work, decide which approach made things worse. Try this one again. Children usually exhibit a particular misbehavior a few last times before they learn that it is not working anymore.

Talk with older children during a calm moment about their behavior and help them understand what you want. Listen to what they say, rephrasing it carefully. Ask them to tell you what they think should happen.

Do not hit your child. It only shows them that aggression and anger are a way to solve problems.

Do not call your children names. Name-calling is emotionally damaging and often causes children to act worse.

It is also a good idea to read books from time to time about childrearing so you can better understand why your child acts as he does.

Take a parenting class. These are not only helpful but you can get many ideas and lots of support from other parents. Community mental health centers, local churches, public schools, and colleges often offer parenting classes.

RESOURCES

Parents as Teachers has information pages on discipline, play time, coping with stress, parenting advice, etc. www.parentsasteachers.org

For car trip activities, check out www.momsminivan.com

For suggestions on the best toys for children, check out www.kidshealth.org. Search by “toys” and also “video games” for guidance on movies and games good for kids, how long to let them watch or play, how to manage their internet time and so forth.