

Understanding and Promoting Discipline in Children

Introduction

You can begin laying the groundwork for good behavior from the time your child is born. When you respond to your infant's cries, you are teaching her that you are there, you can be counted on when she needs you, and that she can trust you. When your child is about two months of age, start to modify your responses and encourage your baby to establish good sleeping patterns by letting her fall asleep on her own. By keeping a reasonably steady schedule, you can guide her toward eating, sleeping and playing at times that are appropriate for your family. This lays the groundwork for acceptable behavior later on.

Once your baby starts to crawl (between 6 and 9 months of age) and as she learns to walk (between 9 and 16 months of age), safety is the most critical discipline issue. The best thing you can do for your child at this age is to give her the freedom to explore certain things and make other things off-limits. For example, put childproof locks on some cabinets, such as those that contain cleaning products and heavy dishes or pots. This feeds your baby's need to explore and practice but in safe ways that are acceptable to you.

You will need to provide extra supervision during this period. If your child moves toward a dangerous object, such as a hot stove, simply pick her up, firmly say, "no, hot" and offer her a toy to play with instead. She may laugh at first as she tries to understand you but after a few weeks, she will learn.

Discipline issues become more complex at about 18 months of age. At this time, a child wants to know how much power she has and will test the limit of that power repeatedly. It is important for parents to decide — together — what those limits will be and stick to them. Parents need to be very clear about what is acceptable behavior. This will reduce the child's confusion and her need to test. Setting consistent guidelines for children when they are young also will help establish important rules for the future.

Many parents think discipline and punishment is the same thing. However, they are really quite different. Discipline is a whole system of teaching based on a good relationship, praise and instruction for the child on how to control his behavior. Punishment is negative; an unpleasant consequence for doing or not doing something. Punishment should only be a very small part of discipline.

Effective discipline should take place all the time, not just when children misbehave. Children are more likely to change their behavior when they feel encouraged and valued, not shamed and humiliated. When children feel good about themselves and cherish their relationship with their parents, they are more likely to listen and learn.

Discipline should not always be telling children "no". Since discipline is teaching, you should also catch children being good. Pointing out the child's good behavior will more likely to increase the appropriate behavior. A simple praise of the behavior should suffice.

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

Even though your children's behavior and values seem to be on the right track, your children will still challenge you because it is in their nature and is a 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 and develop good behavior and a positive approach toward life.

Sometimes, however, conflicts are more than occasional disturbances and become a pattern for how parents and children interact. Disobedience can have a variety of causes. At times, it is due to unreasonable parental expectations. Alternatively, it might be related to the child's temperament, or to school problems, family stress, or conflicts between his parents.

Youngsters who are generally cooperative and agreeable may suddenly become disrespectful and disobedient during middle childhood. This is usually a sign that they are experiencing a lot of inner turmoil or that a significant new stress is occurring around them, such as abuse or school failure. Their hostility is directed toward the nearest target, those closest to them, and is a way of coping with and expressing the stress they feel.

Some children may have a lengthy history of being out of control and noncooperative. This is a serious problem. When children have been disobedient for long periods, there is often conflict and disorganization within the family as a whole. The children may reject their parents' authority, feeling that their mother and father disapprove not only of their behavior but also of them as people. Thus, these youngsters learn to be unhappy, and their self-esteem can suffer greatly. Gradually, if the family relationships continue to deteriorate, the children become even more angry, sad, hostile, and aggressive.

As a parent, you need to keep in mind that middle childhood is a vulnerable period of life. Young school-age children are quite egocentric, thinking that all events that happen around them have something to do with themselves. For example, in families where there is marital conflict, youngsters may misinterpret this problem, concluding that they themselves have been bad and have upset their parents. In the process their self-esteem may suffer, and they may be more prone to reacting inappropriately to the events around.

Reasons for Discipline

What do children obtain from discipline?

Self Esteem (feeling of being loveable and capable)

A sense of self control

Social confidence

Better friendships

Less loneliness because of better social skills and better friendships

Emotional maturity and empathy

Ability to problem solve and organize

Better ability to care for self

Better school performance due to better perseverance, motivation, and better self control

The Steps, Rules, Methods (and Tips) for Discipline

Step # 1

What are the rules for the home, for social and for school?

Step # 2

Understand the reasons for the negative behavior

Is in a normal developmental behavior or reaction?

Is the behavioral expectation appropriate for the development age of the child?

Is the child attempting to escape a negative situation? A chore, a bad school situation?

Is the child receiving too much environmental stimulation or not enough for their temperament and developmental level?

Is it due to inability to effectively communicate a need? Inability to obtain something tangible?

Is it a reaction to a new stressor? Is it due to an upset? Is something happening in the child's life we are not aware of? (I.e. a bully, a loss of a friend etc.)

Is it to obtain attention (negative as well and positive attention?)

Is due to poor learning or poor modeling? Imitating how others around the child behaves
(Check in with yourself and spouse)

Is due to poor problem solving skills? Are they aware they can problem solve?

Have we been rescuing the child before they have a chance to problems solve?

Is it a temperamental mismatch between child and adult?

Is it us, the adults? Are we reacting to things in our learning, culture, and experiences?

Rule # 3 Used the appropriate discipline method (see below) and consider changing the discipline method when the present method is not working.

Discipline Methods

Time-Out

Time-outs generally are reserved for aggressive behaviors (physical and verbal) and after other behavioral techniques fail. It is a way for the child to regain their control when it has been lost. Time-outs work best when the inappropriate behaviors are defined to the child ahead of time and the child knows how the “time out” is to be done.

Follow these steps to make a time-out work:

Choose a time-out spot. This should be a boring place with no distraction (a chair, a mat a towel) Bathrooms can be dangerous and bedrooms may become playgrounds. Decide what behaviors (i.e. verbal and physical aggression) will be punished with time-out and explain this to your child.

When your child does something he knows will result in a time-out, you may warn them once (unless it is overt aggression) with a count to three. If it happens again, send them to their “time-out spot” *immediately*. Tell them what they did wrong in as few words as possible. **“Act, don’t Yak”** A rule of thumb is one 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.) In general time outs should be short. If your child will not go to the time out spot on their own, carry them there. If they will not stay, stand behind them and hold them gently but firmly by the shoulders or restrain him in your lap and say, “I am holding you here because you have to have a time-out.” Do not discuss it any further. Some people use beanbag chairs for children who have difficult sitting still. If you are outside the home, you can use a colored towel or mat as their “time out spot”.

Once your child is capable of sitting quietly, you may want to set a timer so that they will know when the time-out is over. If fussing starts again, restart the timer. Wait until your child stops protesting before you set the timer. The child needs to sit quietly. Do talk to them further during time out. If your child is scared about your disapproval keep them in eyesight but do not talk to them. When the time is up, help your child return to a positive activity. Your child has “served his time.” Hug him and welcome him back. If you need to discuss his behavior, wait several minutes before doing so.

Natural Consequences

When a child sees the natural consequences of their actions, they experience the direct results of their choices. (But be sure the consequences do not place them in any danger.) For example, if your child spills their milk on purpose, they will not have milk to drink. If they throw and breaks her toy on purpose, they will not be able to play with it. It will not be long before your child learns not to spill her milk and to play carefully with her toys.

When you use this method, resist the urge to lecture your child or to rescue them (by getting more milk, for example). Your child will learn best when they learn for themselves and will not blame you for the consequences they receive.

Logical Consequences

Natural consequences work best, but they are not always appropriate. For example, if your child does not pick up her toys, they will be in their way. However, chances are they will not care as much as you do. In this situation, you will need to step in and create a consequence that is closely connected to their actions. You might tell them that if they does not pick up their toys, then you will put them away — but she will not play with them again for the day.

When you use this method, it is important that you mean what you say and that you are prepared to follow through *immediately*. Let you child know that you are serious. You do not have to yell and scream to do this. You can say it in a calm, matter-of-fact way.

Withholding Privileges

In the heat of the moment, you will not always be able to think of a logical consequence. That is when you may want to tell your child that, if he does not cooperate, they will have to give something up they like.

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 likes.

Be sure you can follow through on your promise.

Do not over punish or keep them punishment for long periods of time.

The child will get the point of the punishment however if the consequence is too great the child will simply stew in their anger and the point of the punishment will be lost.

Things to remember when disciplining

Keep rules simple by focusing on “Why do we have rules in the first place “

1. The child’s Health, Safety and learning self-care
2. The child’s Patience and self control/self soothing
3. The child’s Organization and (home and school) to meet daily needs
Since no two homes (or school) situation are the same, organizational rules can (and should) vary from home to home.
4. Teaching the child how to get along with others (Social skills form much of the basis for the child’s self esteem)
5. Self-actualization (who am I, what do I want to be, what are my goals, how am I going to fit into the world)
Meeting personal goals– aspirations
Learning how we are going to fit into the world (Generally for the older child)

Offer / teach alternative behaviors

This can be done by simple examples and modeling. Tell them the correct thing to say and do in a particular situation. Show them by your example.

Keep rules developmentally appropriate to the child’s level of cognitive and emotional development.

Do not set the child to fail by giving them a task too developmentally challenging.

See developmental skills and learning below.

When discussing the behavior with your child, keep the child’s self esteem intact by labeling the act and not the child. Keep it short and simple, Avoid comparison and generalizations.

Both parents need to be CONSISTENT in their expectations.

Preschool children test boundaries and quickly learn where they exist and with whom.

Many behaviors viewed as manipulative are simply attempts at learning and testing of learning and not conscientious oppositionality.

Children will learn more quickly if parents have similar limits and the limits are consistently enforced. That is not saying that children are incapable of learning different limits for different parents. Children are quite adaptable for learning different limits from different people.

What however is more important is that whoever starts the discipline should finish the discipline. (Without interference from the other parent) Whatever differences parents have about discipline should be dealt with away from the child. Research shows that children learn and emotionally do better with less parental conflict. Any parental conflict observed by the child should be resolved maturely and promptly and serve as a behavior model for the child. To avoid conflict altogether parents should decide well in advance the important rules of the home and discuss this with the child.

Avoid unnecessary battles of wills

Give the child choices. Empower them to make their own decisions where appropriate and no negative outcome in the decision.

However, do not allow them to make a decision when there is none. (When to go to bed, being ready to leave on time etc.)

Avoid the over ask “why” questions: Expectations for the child should be discussed and understood before hand.

The “why” question may not be needed in the preschool child since they are yet capable of understanding “why” Preschool children often focus on the sensory, emotional or salient features in their environment, so often are incapable of understanding the consequences of their behavior (The Cause and Effect or “The Why”)

The repeated “why” question may be nothing more than a way to simply test boundaries.

Preschoolers do not play by the rules and do not know what to do with the power when given it.

For this reason you are allowed to be a benevolent dictator and sometimes avoid the “Why” question altogether in this age group.

The “Wherefore and Why” however should be provided to the School age child but should not be given repeatedly.

You can be more democratic beginning at age 5 years however 5 year olds still lack the necessary judgment to negotiate rules. True rule negotiation should not occur until mid adolescence.

As with preschoolers the repeated “why” question may simply become a way to test boundaries.

You should only have to explain “why” once or twice.

Have the child repeat it if necessary. (See the above reasons for rules)

Do not forget to reinforce the appropriate behavior with praise. “Catch them being good”.

When your child is obedient and respectful, compliment him for that behavior. Also reward for cooperation and resolution of disagreements. Reward the behavior with positive attention.” Rewards with positive attention will always be more successful than punishment.

On the other hand, too many negative reprimands can reinforce negative behaviors. Negative attention is better than no attention at all. Ideally, praise of the positive behaviors should occur more often than reprimand. For the younger child, keep a chart with point for positive behaviors and reward/privileges for cumulative points.

Praise but do not over-praise

Praise them for good behavior and following the rules but also encourage them to do things on their own. Self confidence comes from a sense that they can complete a task on their own. Praising the child during a task may make them stop the task to want more praise making it more difficult to complete the task. Over praising them by repeating over and over “how wonderful they are” may make you non believable, especially at times they are not feeling good about themselves. Other children also may feel pressured to act up because no one is “that wonderful”.

Always remember that Discipline means teaching. (Verbally or by example)

Take the time to teach children how to better verbalize needs rather than acting out. (Hitting, tantrum etc)

This should not imply children should get every want and need however children should feel that their wants and needs are appreciated when communicated appropriately.

This could also an opportune time to teach delayed gratification to children.

Expect children to cry

Crying is a normal response to change or frustration. It is from frustration and normal life challenges that children first find solutions. Do not deny your child their feelings, however do not be moved by the crying. When crying is part of a tantrum, you can acknowledge it first and then ignore it.

Do not give into the tantrums.

Explain to the child that while it may be normal to feel angry, tantrums do not work and will not change your mind.

Before age three, children expressive verbal skills may not be sophisticated enough to appropriately express their anger, however we can empathetic and/or appropriately communicate their need for them. By age three children should be learning how to verbalize their anger appropriately.

Ignore temper tantrums which are simply means to seek inappropriate attention.

Ignore the behavior with an explanation. Tell the child “I see you’re mad and I’ll leave alone to cool off”

Physically move the child to the intended location if having a refusal-type tantrum. (Refusing to go to bed etc.) Allow the tantrum for 2 to 3 minutes then verbalize their feeling for them (“I know you want to play some more, but its bedtime”) then physically place them in the bed

Use time out if the tantrum are too disruptive to ignore (Hitting, screaming for a long time, tantrum in public places, property destruction)

Hold the child for comfort if the child is having a harmful (significant chance of self injury) or a rage type tantrum. These type of tantrums are scary to the child so offer them your sense of control by holding them for up to 1 to 3 minutes and telling them you know their angry. These types a rage tantrum rarely last past three years of age.

Give the child the appropriate type of Attention

No one will argue that the children’s need for security, food, clothing, learning (social and academic) and safety come first. This however does not mean your needs should always come second.

Your child’s whims (i.e. an extra bedtime story) or wants (i.e. extra time for play) should come after your needs are met and time allows. Children do need quality time that includes positive attention, however this should not require every free moment of every free evening and weekend. It is not good for the child or the marriage. Spending time out with your spouse is both good for the marriage and for parenting. Your child needs to trust and respect other adults in their care and learn and that they can survive a separation.

Teach your child to wait

By learning to wait, children learn to cope better with frustration. This can start by simply not allowing children to interrupt conversations and important tasks. Simply remind the child to wait till you are through.

What to do neither when the methods are not working

Is the rule necessary?

Is the rule developmentally appropriate?

Is it an issue of temperament?

Has the rule been consistently enforced?

Is the child simply seeking attention? (Negative as well as positive)

Is the child simply failing to adequately express a need?

Has the child been given ample opportunity to learn self-control and the self-control been positively reinforced?

Has the child been taught and taught within the appropriate setting? (i.e. not during a tantrum episode)

If you are comparing the child's behavior to another child or sibling, remember that there is a range of normal developmental skills between children. Children also vary in their temperaments.

Have I kept my own sense of humor intact?

Keys to Effective Discipline

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 your child's abilities and limitations.** Children develop at different rates and have different strengths and weaknesses. When your child misbehaves, it may be that he simply cannot do what you are asking of him.
- **Think before you speak.** Once you make a rule or promise, you will need to stick to it. Be sure you are being realistic.
- **Remember that children do what "works."** If your child throws a temper tantrum in the grocery store and you bribe him or her to stop by giving candy, your child will probably throw another tantrum the next time you go. Make an effort to avoid reinforcing the wrong kinds of behavior, even with just your attention.
- **Work toward consistency.** No one is consistent all of the time. However, try to make sure that your goals, rules and approaches to discipline stay the same from day to day. Children find frequent changes confusing and may resort to testing limits just to find out what the limits are.
- **Pay attention to your child's feelings.** If you can figure out why your child is misbehaving, you are one step closer to solving the problem. Often it helps to let your child know that you understand. For example, "I know you are feeling sad that your friend is leaving, but you still have to pick up your toys."
- **Learn to see mistakes — including your own — as opportunities to learn.** If you do not handle a situation well the first time, don't despair. Figure out what you could have done differently, and 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.

Tips To Avoid Trouble

The first thing to remember is to avoid power struggles whenever possible. Instead, address only those issues that truly are important to you. The following tips may help:

- **Offer choices whenever possible.** By giving choices, you can set limits and still allow your child some independence. For example, try saying, "Would you like to pick up your toys yourself, or should I help you?"
- **Make a game out of good behavior.** Your child is more likely to do what you want if you make it fun. For example you might say, "Let's have a race and see who can put his coat on first."
- **Plan ahead.** If you know that certain circumstances always cause trouble, such as a trip to the store, discuss with your child ahead of time what behavior is acceptable and what the consequences will be if he or she does not obey. Try to plan the shopping trip for a time when your child is well rested and well fed, and take along a book or small toy to amuse your child if he or she gets bored.

Praise good behavior. Whenever your child remembers to follow the rules, offer encouragement and praise about how well he or she did. You do not need any elaborate system of rewards. You can simply say, "Thank you for coming right away," and hug your child.

Temperament and how it plays into Discipline

Understand the significance of an individual's child's temperament.

Temperament is an individual's innate behavioral style. It does not concern itself with the individual's motivations and reasons. It is the "how" or behavior and not the "why" or the "what" (ability) of behavior.

An individual's temperament can help the child deal with stress however in some cases make them more vulnerable.

Parents sometimes interpret a child's style of interacting as inherently bad. However, a youngster's temperament is only a problem when it conflicts with the expectations of his parents, other family members, friends or teachers. For example, if a parent is intense and ambitious, and his or her youngster is mild-mannered and easygoing, the parent may feel disappointed, frustrated and angry. The child, pressured to behave in ways foreign to his basic inclinations and innate personality, may resist and cause conflict within the family.

The problem is on its way to being resolved when you recognize and accept the reality that there is a mismatch of temperaments. Once you acknowledge that your personalities are different, any tendencies to blame either the child or yourself should ease. You need to modify your childrearing strategies to some extent to ensure a better "fit" between you and your child. At the same time, you need to help him learn to compromise, adapt and expand his repertoire of acceptable social responses and behavior. When you think of your child's temperament in objective terms rather than react to it emotionally and instinctively, you and your child will get along better. If your child has a difficult temperament as a preschooler, and if you understand and respond appropriately, he will probably modify his behavior, and may not remain as difficult during his school-age years. His intensity can become part of his enthusiasm, determination, charm and zeal as he feels better about himself and his relationship with others. For that to happen, your own attitudes and behaviors can play a major role in how he adapts and expresses his feelings.

Also, in the weeks and months ahead, avoid labeling your child as bad or difficult. Labels stick, and not only may family members unfairly prejudge your youngster, but he may come to see himself as different, undesirable or just not fitting in. This negative self-image can further interfere with efforts - both yours and his - to improve his way of responding to difficult situations and can lead to more serious emotional conflicts.

What is your temperament and parenting style? Learn to be authoritative and not an authoritarian

Parents have their own temperaments, social skills and parenting style that can influence a child's social abilities and her acceptance by peers. If you are highly critical, disapproving, rejecting or aggressive, your child will tend to mimic your style and behave in a hostile and aggressive manner with her peers. By contrast, if you are generous, accepting and patient, your child probably will adopt these same characteristics and do much better in making friends.

If you react to your child's talking back by exploding or losing your temper, they will respond with disobedience and disrespect. By contrast, he will become more obedient when you remain calm, cooperative, and consistent. He will learn to be respectful if you are respectful toward him and others in the family. If he becomes disobedient and out of control, impose a timeout until he calms down and regains self-control.

Authoritarian parents tend to over-control their children, instituting a set of absolute rules and standards. As they emphasize a high degree of control, they may deemphasize warmth and trust. They also tend to assert their power by restricting privileges and even withdrawing love or approval. This parenting style may cause the child to feel rejected and isolated. She may develop only adequate social skills and will tend to remain dependent on her mother and father.

Permissive parents are at the other end of the spectrum. They demonstrate considerable warmth and affection, are generally very accepting, exercise a low level of control over their children, and make few demands upon them. Their children tend to become moderately independent and achieve modest degrees of social success.

Authoritative parents fall between these two extremes. While exercising considerable control, they also exhibit warmth and affection and seem to have appropriate expectations for their children. As their

youngsters move through the middle years of childhood, the parents recognize the growing maturity of their offspring; encourage appropriate levels of responsibility and use reason and negotiation in resolving differences. Their children tend to be independent and socially successful.

The way you relate to your child can also be influenced by the child herself. If your child is temperamentally difficult, for instance, you may react by becoming more anxious, aggressive, negative, and controlling, and less nurturing and less likely to respond positively. As a result, your child may grow up insecure and lacking appropriate social skills, and she may experience difficult interactions with peers.

Normal development and discipline

Prior to 9 months

Verbal discipline should not begin before age 9 months.

Children before 9 months will not understand spoken language.

Children however can be given the opportunity to learn how to self-soothe and sleep through the night by 4 to 6 months

At 9 months

Children are beginning to understand yes and no and redirections should be limited to this.

1 to 2 years

Children understanding of language is increases and children will be able to follow one or two step direction.

Spoken language however does not develop significantly until after 18 months.

Children therefore often act without asking however through gestures communicate and seek a yes or no from the parent. It may look like a game however by making it game children learn the boundaries faster.

2 to 3 years

Children's expressive language is developing rapidly

Children also are learning parallel play with other children (playing around other children/ not necessarily sharing.)

Children should be encouraged or given help by example how to communicate wants and needs rather than act out.

Siblings should be given opportunity to problem solve their own quarrels first before we intervene

Hitting & biting however require immediate intervention.

3 to 5 years

Children's language speaks in complete sentences and understands information in a concrete manner.

Children cognitively cannot see cause and effect of their behaviors because they tend to over focus on the salient and emotional aspect of things in their environment.

They may begin to ask why however may not always understand the wherefores and whys.

This is also a period of impulse control and working memory/attention development though the rate this development will vary from child to child.

5 to 11 years

Begin to understand cause and effect however is still very concrete in interpretations.

Attempts at explaining wherefores and whys should be attempted though should be direct and to the point.

12 through adolescence

Not only capable of understanding the wherefores and whys (rules) but should begin to extrapolate and generalize this information to other settings.

Adolescents despite their new found cognitive skills still often lack in judgment. (Particularly social)

They may also lack ability to interpret subtle nonverbal cues and take meaning out of context.

Suggested reading:

1, 2, 3 Magic Effective Discipline for Children 2 -12

Author: Thomas Phelan PhD

Available addwarehouse.com

Also available in audio and video tape

Items to be later added to handout

A word about corporal punishment

Notes on talking back