



The Elements of Discipline

There are two major reasons for discipline. The first is to protect your child from danger. The second is to teach your child right from wrong and start to teach them reasonable limits and respect for the needs of others.

It is important to establish your rights as a parent first and foremost as you teach your child to respect the rights of others. Infants as young as 4-5 months old can learn to understand no and be taught things such as not to bite Mom with their newly emerged teeth during breastfeeding. While children do not really develop good self-control until age 3-4 years, they need to start being given external controls as early as 6 months to protect them and help them eventually learn self-control.

Rule Setting:

Begin discipline at 6 months of age. Apart from things such as biting while nursing or pulling hair, babies younger than 6 months do not need to be disciplined. As they learn to crawl, however, they need rules for their own safety.

Be concrete, clear, and brief. Infants and toddlers will not understand nor can they usually attend to a long lecture or series of instructions. They need simple clear rules such as "Don't push."

Be sure to state what the appropriate action is. Make sure your child is aware of what you want her to do. An example

would be: “I need you to sit here and look at these books until I get off the phone.”

Ignore trivial misbehavior to avoid constant criticism.

This is in the “pick your battles” category. We want to have a healthy relationship with our children, and while we have a lot to teach them, we do not want to come off as totally negative. We want to praise them when they do listen and are behaving appropriately. Also, toddlers are natural explorers, and many of the things they want to do are potentially dangerous. Since there are so many things we must prohibit for their own good, we do not want to belabor trivial things such as swinging their legs or occasional whining.

Give rules that are fair and reasonable for the child’s developmental level.

Children should not be punished for behavior that is part of a child’s emotional development, such as thumb sucking, toilet training accidents, or separation anxiety. They should be comforted when these things occur and encouraged that things will get easier as they get a little older.

Prioritize rules and concentrate on just a few initially.

Safety rules such as “You must never run out into the street” are the highest priority. After safety, the second priority is respect for property and avoiding any behavior that damages the property (yours and especially belonging to others). After those two major ones, then we tackle issues such as whining or throwing tantrums.

Apply the rules as consistently as possible. As parents, we are only human, and there will be times we may not follow through or times we should overlook our own rules, but in general, the more consistent we are, the easier it will be for our children to learn to follow the rules.

Techniques for certain ages

6 months to 3 years: Structured home environment, distraction, ignoring, verbal and nonverbal disapproval, physically moving or escorting, brief time-out.

3-5 years: Techniques above especially time-out, natural consequences, and logical consequences. Restriction places for certain behaviors.

5 years – teenage: Techniques above in addition to delay or removal of privilege, negotiation via family meetings

Adolescence: Logical consequences, “I” messages, family meetings about house rules.

Structured home environment: Keep your infant and toddler out of harm’s way by putting up gates and cabinet locks. We want to allow the child as much freedom as possible to play and roam without getting into trouble. Movable gates to allow a safe play yard are often a great idea, which allows the child to play and have fun without having to be reprimanded.

Distraction: Helping your upset child get interested in something else is very useful, especially when in public or at someone else’s house.

Ignore harmless misbehavior: If your child is in a safe place and not causing disturbance to others (at home), ignoring a temper tantrum is usually the best course of action. Ignoring is

also helpful for such behaviors as whining, bickering, or interrupting.

Verbal and nonverbal disapproval: This can be as simple as getting close to your child, looking him right in the eye, and saying a firm “No.”

Physically moving or escorting: Manual guidance is when you physically move your child from one place to another, such as to bed, to the bath, time-out chair, etc against his will, helping him as much as needed (carrying him if he will not allow himself to be led).

Time-out: The concept of time-out, which we typically begin at age 2, is to remove our attention from the child in response to persistent lack of cooperation or misbehavior. The child is removed from the place of misbehavior to a boring place such as a playpen or corner of a room. Avoid using the child’s bedroom or crib for this as to not cause association of sleep with punishment. Sometimes we must physically hold a young child in time-out if they will not stay, but we are careful not to look at, talk to, or play with the child in this scenario. Generally, the time spent in time out is one minute for each year of age. Setting a timer is essential for this technique to avoid keeping the child in too long or too short.

Restriction of location for certain undesirable behaviors: There are some behaviors and habits that children develop that take a long time to extinguish or that may never be fully extinguished but must be taught are not socially acceptable to occur in public. Examples of this are nose picking or scratching or touching one’s private parts. If your child does not immediately cease this behavior when you request it, you can have the child go to his room until he stops. This can help avoid power struggles.

Natural consequences: Your child can learn from poor choices that are not too dangerous. For example, refusal to wear a coat when going outside to play will cause the child to be uncomfortably cold. Insisting on playing roughly with a particular toy may result in its breakage, and then the child will no longer have that toy.

Logical consequences: These are consequences parents assign that are logically related to the misbehavior. For example, misusing a possession will result in its removal or loss of a certain privilege for a finite period of time.

Delay a privilege: This is a logical rule to enforce such as “No television until after homework is done.”

“I” messages: This is when you tell your child how her behavior makes you feel. An example would be: “I get upset when you leave your room looking like this.”

Family meetings: As children get older, family meetings are a good tool to discuss rules and problems. You can encourage participation from children by asking questions such as “What are some ways we could solve this problem that you think would be fair?” You may not choose to implement the child’s suggestion, but allowing him a voice in the matter empowers him to start thinking about coming up with solutions, rather than just telling you the problem.

Avoid physical punishment: Physical discipline is the least likely to be effective and can often inflame the situation with a child who is out of control and prompt the child to possibly hit back. While usually to be avoided, a quick swat to the behind of a child who does something dangerous (such as darting out

into the street) can be very effective when spanking is otherwise never used.

Avoid yelling: Yelling causes an angry child to want to yell back and teaches the child to yell when she is angry. While it is difficult to maintain one's composure all the time, it is a goal to work towards. Your child will be calmer in the long run if you pattern staying calm.

Catch your child being good: It is extremely important to notice when your child is behaving in the manner you desire. Praise your child for the desired behavior. Studies have shown that praising your child for particular behaviors increases his motivation to continue the behavior. Saying "I am so impressed by how you continued to work out that problem until you came to the right answer. That shows persistence" is much more effective than "You are such a smart boy."

Hints for effective consequences:

1. **Be clear and brief.** Follow through on what you tell your child.
2. **Be kind.** Talk to your child the way you want others to talk to you. You can begin by empathizing with your child, saying something like "I wish I could let you keep coloring, but now it is time to get ready for bed."
3. **Apply consequences immediately.** If your child no longer remembers why she is being punished, it won't be very effective.
4. **Concisely remind your child why he is being punished.** State the infraction in one sentence, and then restate the rule. "You are losing your hour of TV time because you hit your sister. We do not hit."
5. **Ignore your child's arguments while you are correcting her.** This is a way children delay punishment.

- Discuss the behavior at a later time, but avoid engaging in argument in the moment.
6. **Keep punishments brief and reasonable.** A preferred toy should be taken away for hours or a day, not weeks. Time out is 1 minute per year of age with a maximum of 10 minutes.
 7. **Once the child serves the consequence, embrace him.** Do not comment on the previous misbehavior, but start anew.
 8. **Be specific about the infraction and do not generalize to make comments about the child.** An example would be to say, "Throwing food is unacceptable. You are in time out for 4 minutes." We would never want to say, "You are a bad girl."

RECOMMENDED READING

Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk.

Foster Cline and Jim Fay, Parenting with Love and Logic.