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Discipline in children

All children misbehave sometimes. As a parent, you have to decide how you will respond. Your child needs rules to understand how to behave.

Discipline involves both punishment and rewards. When you discipline your children, you are teaching them what is good behavior and what is not good behavior. Discipline is important to:

- Protect children from harm
- Teach self-discipline
- Develop good social skills

Information

Every parent has their own parenting style. You may be strict or you may be laid back. The key is to:

- Set clear expectations
- Be consistent
- Be loving

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

Try these parenting pointers:

Reward good behavior. As much as you can, try to focus on the positive. Let your children know that you are pleased when they are behaving the way you wish. By showing your approval, you encourage good behavior and help build self-esteem.

Let natural consequences teach your child. While it is not easy, you should not always prevent bad things from happening. If your child is frustrated with a toy and breaks it, let them learn that they no longer have that toy to play with.

Consider your child's age when setting limits or punishing. Don't expect more from your child than your child can do. For example, a toddler cannot control the impulse to touch things. Instead of trying to tell them not to touch, put fragile objects out of reach. If you use time outs, put your children in time out for 1 minute per each year of age. For example, put your 4-year-old into time out for 4 minutes.

Be clear. Let your child know ahead of time what you will be doing for discipline. Don't make it up in the heat of the moment. Tell your child what behavior needs to change and what you will do if it does not.

Tell your child exactly what you expect from them. Rather than saying, "Your room is messy," tell the child what needs to be picked up or cleaned. For example, tell your child to put their toys away and make their bed. Explain what the punishment will be if they do not take care of their room.

Don't argue. Once you have set expectations, do not get dragged into an argument about what's fair. Don't keep defending yourself once you have stated what you want. Remind your child about the rules you have set and leave it at that.

Be consistent. Don't change rules or punishments at random. If more than one adult is disciplining the child, work together. It is confusing to your child when one caregiver accepts certain behaviors but the other caregiver punishes for the same behavior. Your child may learn to play one adult against the other.

Show respect. Treat your child with respect. By respecting your child, you build trust. Behave the way you want your child to behave.

Follow through on your discipline. If you tell your child that they will lose their TV time today if they hit, be prepared to turn off the TV for the day.

Do not make huge threats of punishment that you will never do. When you threaten a punishment but do not follow through, your child learns that you do not mean what you say.

Instead, pick punishments that you can and are willing to do. For example, if your kids are fighting, say: "The fighting must stop now, if you do not stop, we will not go to the movies." If your kids do not stop fighting, do not go to the movies. Your kids will learn that you mean what you say.

Be calm, friendly, and firm. A child may become angry, tearful, or sad, or may start a tantrum. The calmer your behavior is, the more likely your children will pattern their behavior after yours. If you spank or hit, you are showing them that it is acceptable to solve problems with violence.

Look for patterns. Does your child always get upset and act out over the same thing or in the same situation? If you understand what triggers your child's behavior, you may be able to prevent or avoid it.

Know when to apologize. Remember that being a parent is a hard job. Sometimes you will get out of control and not behave well. When this happens, apologize to your child. Let them know that you will respond differently the next time.

Help your child with tantrums. Allow your children to express their feelings, but at the same time, help them cope with anger and frustration without violent or aggressive behavior. Here are some tips on dealing with temper tantrums:

- When you see your child starting to get worked-up, distract their attention with a new activity.
- If distraction does not work, ignore your child. Every time you react to a tantrum, you reward the negative behavior with extra attention. Scolding, punishing, or even trying to reason with the child may cause your child to act up more.
- If you are in public, remove the child without discussion or fuss. Wait until the child calms down before resuming your activities.

- If the tantrum involves hitting, biting, or other harmful behavior, do not ignore it. Tell the child that the behavior will not be tolerated. Move the child away for a few minutes.
- Remember, children cannot understand lots of explanations. Do not attempt to reason. Give the punishment right away. If you wait, the child will not connect the punishment with the behavior.
- Do not give in and change your rules during a tantrum. If you give in, your child has learned that tantrums work.

What you need to know about spanking. Experts have found that spanking:

- Can make children more aggressive.
- Can get out of control and the child can get hurt.
- Teaches children that it is OK to hurt someone they love.
- Teaches children to be afraid of their parent.
- Teaches children to avoid being caught, rather than learning better behavior.
- May reinforce bad behavior in children acting out just to get attention. Even negative attention is better than no attention.

When to seek help. If you have tried many parenting techniques, but things are not going well with your child, it is a good idea to talk with your child's health care provider.

You should also talk to your child's provider if you find that your child:

- Disrespects all adults
- Is always fighting everyone
- Seems depressed or blue
- Does not seem to have friends or activities that they enjoy

Alternative Names

Setting limits; Teaching children; Punishment; Well child care - discipline

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