

Positive Discipline and Child Guidance

Every adult who cares for children has a responsibility to guide, correct and socialize them toward appropriate behaviors. These actions often are called child guidance and discipline. Positive guidance and discipline are crucial for children because they promote self-control, teach responsibility and help them make thoughtful choices. The more effective adult caregivers are at encouraging appropriate child behavior, the less time and effort they will spend correcting misbehavior. Family specialists agree that using physical force, threats and put-downs can interfere with a child's healthy development.

Family specialists also agree that there is no perfect formula that answers all questions about discipline. Children are as unique as the families they belong to. A discipline strategy that works with one child may not work with another.

Effective guidance and discipline focus on the development of the child. They also preserve the child's self-esteem and dignity. Actions that insult or belittle are likely to cause children to view their parents and other caregivers negatively, which can inhibit learning and teach the child to be unkind to others. Acknowledging a child's efforts and progress, no matter how slow or small, encourages healthy development.

Teaching children self-discipline is a demanding task. It requires patience, thoughtful attention, cooperation and a good understanding of the child. It also requires knowledge of one's own strengths and struggles with disciplinary issues. Unfortunately, the only preparation for most parents is their own experience of being parented. Such past experiences may not always be helpful in raising children.

Proactive strategies

Child misbehavior is impossible to prevent completely. Children, usually curious and endlessly creative, are likely to do things parents and other caregivers will not expect. However, there are many positive steps adults can take to minimize misbehavior:

- Set clear, consistent rules.
- Make certain the environment is safe and worry-free.
- Show interest in the child's activities.
- Provide appropriate and engaging playthings.

- Encourage self-control by providing meaningful choices.
- Focus on the desired behavior, rather than the one to be avoided.
- Build children's self-image as trustworthy, responsible and cooperative.
- Expect the best from the child.
- Give clear directions, one at a time.
- Say "yes" whenever possible and appropriate.
- Notice and pay attention to children when they do things right.
- Take action before a situation gets out of control.
- Be encouraging.
- Set a good example.
- Help children see how their actions affect others.

Possible reasons children misbehave

If parents understand why their children misbehave, they can be more successful at reducing behavioral problems. These reasons for misbehavior may help parents develop a better understanding of their children:

- Testing whether caregivers will enforce rules
- Expectations differ between school and home
- Inadequate understanding of the rules, or being held to expectations beyond their developmental levels
- Asserting themselves and their independence
- Feeling ill, bored, hungry or sleepy
- Lack of accurate information or prior experience
- Previously rewarded with attention for their misbehavior
- Copying the actions of their parents

Positive disciplinary techniques

True misbehavior occurs when a child chooses to behave inappropriately. Before you take action, consider these points about discipline:

- Is the child really doing something wrong? Is there a real problem, or are you just tired and out of patience?
 - If there is no real problem, release your stress away from the child.
 - If there is a problem, go to the next question.
- Think for a moment about whether your child is actually capable of doing what you expect.
 - If you are not being realistic, re-evaluate your expectations.

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Parents' early experience with discipline

Take a few minutes to reflect on your own childhood years. Evaluate how your parents disciplined you. Which practices would you thank them for? Which would you like to do differently?

Practices to keep

New practices to try

Remembering how it felt to be a child can help you understand children and relate to their behavior.

- If your expectations are fair, go to the next question.
- Did your child know at the time that they were doing something wrong?
 - If your child did not realize they were doing something wrong, help them understand what you expect them to do and how they can do that. Offer to help.
 - If your child knew what they were doing was wrong and intentionally disregarded a reasonable expectation, they misbehaved.

If the behavior was an accident, like wetting their pants while sleeping, it was not a misbehavior. If the behavior was not an accident, ask your child to tell you their reasons for doing what they did. If your child is old enough, ask how they might solve the problem or correct the situation. Children develop by thinking through a situation and developing possible solutions.

Responding to misbehavior

Here are five strategies parents and other caregivers can use to respond to child misbehavior. Rules should be fully explained and clearly understood before misbehavior occurs. Whenever possible, involve children in making the rules for the family or the classroom.

Natural consequences

Allowing children to experience the consequences of their behavior is also called learning the hard way. For example, Gena does not put her books back in her school bag after she finishes reading. One day she loses a book, and therefore must find a way to replace it.

Only use natural consequences when they will not endanger the child's health or safety.

Logical consequences

These are structured consequences that follow specific misbehaviors. The child should be able to see how the behavior and the consequence are directly related.

For example, Andrew, who is a teenager, knows that if he stays out past his curfew on a school night, his parents will not allow him to go out with his friends over the weekend.

Fix-up

If children damage something, they need to help fix it or clean it up. If they cause someone distress, they should help relieve it.

For example, "Now that you made your brother cry, please come apologize and help me soothe him."

Time out

During time out, children are required to spend time alone in a specific place that has few, if any, rewarding characteristics. This strategy gives children a chance to reflect quietly on their behavior away from others. When giving a time out, be calm and firm. One minute for each year of the child's age is appropriate.

For example, "Hannah, we have talked often about how hitting is not acceptable. But because you hit Jerry, please leave the playground and go to the Time Out Table for five minutes. Please think about how Jerry might have felt when you hit him."

Redirection

This strategy can work when you notice a child not following the rules and being uncooperative. Quickly get the child's attention and introduce another activity.

For example, "Tom, please help me water the flowers now. You've been riding the bike for a long time and now it's Lena's turn."

Parenting styles

Researchers have described four general styles of parenting: authoritarian, permissive, neglectful and authoritative. Most parents do not fall neatly in one category, but somewhere in the middle with characteristics of more than one style. Also, some parents change styles depending on experience, age, maturity level and the situation.

A caregiver who is authoritarian

- Values obedience, tradition and order
- May use physical punishment
- Usually doesn't allow choices or freedom of expression

Possible outcomes: Children of authoritarian parents might become followers and depend on others for making decisions. They may develop low self-esteem, become aggressive or defiant.

A caregiver who is permissive

- Sets few rules and guidelines
- Does not provide structure
- Does not enforce limits when they are established

Possible outcomes: Children of permissive parents may have low self-control and handle frustration poorly. They may remain immature and have difficulty accepting responsibility.

A caregiver who is neglectful

- Rejects or ignores the child
- Does not get involved in the child's life
- Allows the child to do as they please

Possible outcomes: Children of neglectful parents may face many challenges, including difficulties with skill development, trust and self-esteem.

A caregiver who is authoritative

- Sets appropriate rules and guidelines
- Is firm, consistent and fair
- Has reasonable expectations
- Encourages child's independence and individuality
- Uses clear communication and reasoning
- Allows choices and empowers the child

Possible outcomes: Children of authoritative parents are likely to be responsible, independent, have high self-esteem and able to control their aggressive impulses. This style of parenting provides a balance between setting appropriate limits and granting the child independence, as well as providing warmth and supportive guidance.

However, parenting is not the only factor influencing child outcomes. Cultural values, peer behavior, family circumstances and community characteristics all affect the development of children. These factors also influence the style of parenting that is used. For example, authoritative parenting is more effective in some contexts and for some groups than others.

Knowing what to expect from a child

At times, adult expectations may be beyond children's abilities. Discipline and guidance strategies should take into account a child's unique needs and developmental level.

Birth to about age 2

Children need support, contact and loving interactions. If the caregiver is absent, the child may fear that they will not return. At this stage, children build attachments with caregivers. They learn to trust that adults will be there for them when they need them. During these years, children learn through their senses and physical activities.

Age 2 to about 6

Children learn language, some reading and many social skills. They also begin to struggle for more independence from caregivers. If such efforts are understood and encouraged, children begin to take more initiative. During these years, children learn by exploring, pounding,

Learning about your child

Your child is unique. To interact with them effectively, take time to learn about their special qualities. Observe them in various settings and jot down your responses in the space below.

How my child is similar to me? _____

How is my child different from me? _____

How does my child get my attention? _____

What are the things my child loves? _____

What special challenges does my child face? _____

What are my child's special strengths? _____

What do I appreciate about my child? _____

Talk directly with your children about their feelings and daily life experiences. Through frequent and positive interaction, the parent-child relationship is strengthened.

Growing with your child

Learning is a lifelong process for both children and adults. Take a few minutes to think about the new information you've gained about discipline from this guide. Writing down your responses can help you remember them.

I used to think discipline was... _____

Now I know discipline is... _____

I have used this strategy to discipline... _____

Now I will... _____

I used to think that I am... _____

Now I know that... _____

I used to think my child is... _____

Now I know my child is... _____

touching, mixing, moving and throwing objects, and asking many questions.

Age 6 to about 12

Children begin to act with increasing self-control. During these years, they begin to lay the groundwork for becoming productive members of society. They process information and can make complex decisions. They are able to follow rules and accept responsibility. They also develop a self-image based on their experiences and feedback they

receive from significant adults. If this feedback is positive, children grow to become confident and successful teens. If it is frequently negative, children can grow to feel inadequate and inferior.

Nurturing your child

According to numerous studies, nurturance in raising children is an important quality. A nurturing adult is warm, understanding and supportive. Researchers have found that

a child will learn more easily from a nurturing parent than from a harsh one. Children who are raised by nurturing parents are also less likely to become delinquent than those raised by rejecting parents. Here are some examples of nurturing messages to give children:

- You are valued as a person.
- I believe in you.
- I trust you.
- I know you can handle life situations.
- You are listened to.
- You are cared for.
- You are important to me.
- I am pleased with you.
- I love you.
- You can tell me anything.
- It's OK to make mistakes.
- You belong.
- I am learning with you.

More help for parents

Consider taking a class, attending a workshop, reading a book, subscribing to a parenting magazine, accessing Internet resources or talking with other caregivers to learn more about children. To develop a sense of connectedness, consider forming or joining a support group. Support groups are a great way to share ideas, learn with others and possibly trade child-care.

As you care for children, remember that caring for yourself is just as important. Rest, nutrition, exercise and relaxation can help make caring for children more enjoyable. Parenting and child-care will always be challenging, no matter how well prepared you are. However, helping your children achieve self-discipline is worth your effort. It is a major foundation for their lifelong personal and social development.

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