

PARENTS, KIDS AND DISCIPLINE

The first reaction we see on most parents' faces on hearing the word discipline is - raised eyebrows and an expression of despair!

How can you provide discipline to your child so that he or she can function well at home, in school and in public? Every parent wants their children to be happy, respectful, respected by others, and be able to find their place in the world as well-behaved adults. Nobody wants to be accused of raising a spoiled brat. And all this needs to be managed keeping in mind that as parents:

- we shouldn't become their enemies in the face of disciplining,
- we shouldn't harm their emotional well-being and self esteem,
- we will have to achieve this, come what may!

Sometimes it seems that these goals to be achieved are miles away from the child's current behavior. Don't lose heart, don't feel that all is lost and now there is no hope - the road to a pleasant place is never too long!

Read on for barriers to good behavior, effective discipline techniques, and when to get help for dangerous behavior patterns.

What Is Discipline?

Discipline is the process of teaching your child what type of behavior is acceptable and what type is not acceptable. In other words, discipline teaches a child to follow rules. Discipline may involve both punishment, such as a time out, and, more importantly, rewards. It sounds so straightforward, yet every parent becomes frustrated at one time or another with issues surrounding children and discipline.

Barriers to Good Behavior

Parents run up against several barriers when trying to teach good behavior to their children. How many of these have you experienced?

- Children who are disrespectful and don't listen: "I must have told you a thousand times!"
- Children who do listen, but defy or deliberately disobey your request for good behavior.

Accept the Challenge of Establishing Discipline

Your responsibility as a parent is to help your child become self-reliant, respectful, and self-controlled. Relatives, schools, churches, therapists, health care professionals, and others can help. But the primary responsibility for discipline rests with parents.

How do you proceed with this challenge? Take a look at your current parenting style and how you use discipline. The American Mental Health Association describes three styles of parenting:

- **An authoritative parent** has clear expectations and consequences and is affectionate toward his or her child. The authoritative parent allows for flexibility and collaborative

problem solving with the child when dealing with behavioral challenges. This is the most effective form of parenting.

- **An authoritarian parent** has clear expectations and consequences, but shows little affection toward his or her child. The parent may say things like, "because I'm the Mommy, that's why." This is a less effective form of parenting.
- **A permissive parent** shows lots of affection toward his or her child but provides little discipline. This is a less effective form of parenting.

Choosing Discipline Techniques

The discipline techniques you choose may depend on the type of inappropriate behavior your child displays, your child's age, your child's temperament, and your parenting style. The following techniques are recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Mental Health Association:

Rewarding good behavior

Acknowledging good behavior is the best way to encourage your child to continue it. In other words, "Catch him being good." Compliment your child when he or she shows the behavior you've been seeking.

Natural consequences

Your child does something wrong, and you let the child experience the result of that behavior. There's no need for you to "lecture." The child can't blame you for what happened. E.g. if a child deliberately breaks a toy, he or she no longer has that toy to play with.

Natural consequences can work well when children don't seem to "hear" your warnings about the potential outcome of their behavior. Be sure, however, that any consequence they might experience isn't dangerous.

Logical consequences

This technique is similar to natural consequences but involves describing to your child what the consequences will be for unacceptable behavior. The consequence is directly linked to the behavior. For example, you tell your child that if he doesn't pick up his toys, then those toys will be removed for a week.

Taking away privileges

Sometimes there isn't a logical or natural consequence for a bad behavior -- or you don't have time to think it through. In this case, the consequence for unacceptable behavior may be taking away a privilege. For example, if a middle scholar doesn't complete her homework on time, you may choose to take away television privileges for the evening. This discipline technique works best if the privilege is:

- Related in some way to the behavior
- Something the child values
- Taken away as soon as possible after the inappropriate behavior (especially for young children)

Time outs

Time outs work if you know exactly what the child did wrong or if you need a break from the child's behavior. Be sure you have a time-out location established ahead of time. It should be a quiet, boring place -- probably not the bedroom (where the child can play) or a dangerous place like a bathroom. This discipline technique can work with children when the child is old enough to understand the purpose of a time out -- usually around age 2 and older, with about a minute of time out for each year of age. Time outs often work best with younger kids for whom the separation from the parent is truly seen as a deprivation.

What about corporal punishment and spanking?

Corporal (physical) punishment, such as spanking, isn't recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics or mental health associations. Why? Primarily because nonphysical discipline techniques work better with fewer negative consequences. According to the AAP, spanking may result in the following problems:

- Spanking may make children more aggressive
- Spanking can become more violent and harm a child
- Spanking may cause children to think that it's OK to physically hurt someone you love

Tips for Maintaining Discipline

Whichever discipline techniques you choose to use, they can be more effective if you keep these ideas in mind:

Guide your discipline techniques to fit well with your child's temperament.

The key to effective discipline is to understand who your child is, especially his temperamental style, and use your discipline to help him achieve his potential given those talents and tendencies. But your goal should not be to turn him into someone he is not (for example, to turn a boisterous intense child into a mellow laid-back one).

Communicate your discipline plan

Discipline techniques shouldn't come "out of the blue," especially if you're trying something new. To children who are old enough to understand, during a planned discussion (not in the heat of the moment) explain the technique, why you are using it, and what you hope it will accomplish. Older children may be included in choosing which rewards and consequences would be appropriate.

Be respectful of your child

If you show your child respect -- even when disciplining your child -- your child is more likely to respect you, other family members, and other people in his or her life. If you "lose it" or overreact with disrespect, apologize. Behave the way you want your child to behave.

Be consistent

Any technique will fail if you don't follow through or enforce consequences consistently. If you say, for example, that toys will be off limits for a week, then take them away if the offending behavior continues.

Don't break your discipline rules by giving in during public exhibitions of bad behavior, such as a child throwing a tantrum while shopping. If you give in to the child's demands, the tantrums will continue.

Try to keep your goals and your techniques consistent over time. If more than one adult is responsible for the child's discipline, be sure you agree about the approaches you will use.

When it's done, it's done

After the consequence is over or the time has been served, don't ask for apologies or continue to lecture about the behavior. Help your child return to an appropriate activity.

Understand what is appropriate for your child's development

Before disciplining a child, make sure that the child really did understand what you asked him or her to do. Sometimes parents make demands for behavior that is beyond the child's ability to comply. Just like other skills in life, behaviors often need to be "grown into."

Look for the "why" behind behaviors

If you notice a pattern of inappropriate behavior, part of the solution is to look for "whys." For example, perhaps your child is upset about something else, such as a friend moving away. Maybe your child had a bad day at school. Perhaps your child feels stressed about family problems. Maybe he is tired or hungry. These explanations don't excuse the behavior, but trying to understand why bad behavior occurs can help you and your child find ways to prevent the behavior from happening again and again.

Give yourself a break

Even if you have the best discipline techniques and parenting style, there are some days when nothing seems to work. Or perhaps you've had a bad day, too. Developing skills for positive discipline takes a lot of practice and a lot of time. If you feel you have made a mistake, be honest. Apologize to your child and explain how you plan to change your response the next time.

Know When and Where to Go for Help

There may be times when you don't know what to do to help your child learn appropriate behavior. You may have tried all these techniques to no avail. Or you may not know how to change from what you're doing now to something that will be more effective. Any time you have questions about your child's behavior and discipline, check in with your child's doctor.

In addition, if you notice any of these concerns, seek help from a mental health professional:

- Ongoing disrespect for all authorities: parents, teachers, and other adults
- Aggressive or destructive behavior
- Signs of depression, such as feeling blue for a long time, having no friends, or threatening suicide
- If your child or other members of the family use drugs or alcohol to deal with stress or other problems in their lives
- Several relationships within the family are difficult