

Helping Children Behave



The goal of discipline is to assist children in developing skills for making decisions and helping them gradually gain self-control to be responsible for their own behavior.

Children need rules to keep them safe and to help them learn and they rely on adults to help them. Children misbehave to communicate a need for help in directing behavior. Misbehaving can be an opportunity for you to teach them how to behave.

“Do as I do.” Setting a good example is critical because children imitate the adults in their lives. The most powerful teaching skill is modeling the behavior that you expect from your child. Be aware that they will copy manner, tone of voice, language and actions, both appropriate and inappropriate.

Talk Respectfully. Communicating with a child cannot be done effectively from a distance. Time spent talking to them and making eye contact is quality time. Parents who remember to talk to their children discover that their children pay closer attention to what they say.

Things You Can Try

- **Ignore behavior when possible.** This works best with a new, annoying but not harmful behavior like bad language or tantrums. Effective ignoring involves not talking to or looking at them or using any body language that gives attention. However, it is important to stay attentive and quickly return your attention and praise when they do act appropriately by beginning the positive interaction with a smile.
- **Redirect Behavior.** Help them find something else to do that is similar to what they were doing that was disruptive. For example, say, “It’s not safe to throw your truck, but you may throw the ball outside.”

- **Take a Break.** Taking a break is not used as a punishment. They can be sent to a calming place to rest, read or do something pleasant until they are able to gain control of their body and emotions. Taking a break is also a good way for adults to calm down before taking action and shows children an acceptable way of managing anger and frustration.
- **Allow Consequences.** Children learn to be responsible when adults allow them to experience the consequences of their choices. For example, not wearing a rain coat results in wet and uncomfortable clothing.

Other Helpful Tips & Techniques

- Show them what you want them to do.
- Talk in simple statements and make eye contact.
- Deal with behavior problems the same way every time.
- Try to stay in a routine. Have specific times for eating, sleeping and playing.
- Focus on a few rules related to health and safety for them and others.
- Avoid using words labeling your child as “good,” “bad” or “stupid.”
- Deal with the behavior and move on.
- When a change is coming up, let them know. For example, “In five minutes, we’re going to go outside.” (While they may not know what five minutes means, you are helping them know what’s coming next.)
- Use as few words as possible.
- Take away activities and objects for short amounts of time and make sure they understand that the consequence is because of the behavior.

- Make sure they know why what they did was not okay and the reason for the consequence.
- Periodically praise them for doing something positive but avoid over praising because it will lose effect.
- Smile, hug and listen to help your child feel special, which can encourage positive behavior.
- Give choices when you can such as “Do you want to pick up the blocks or the cars first?”
- Avoid yelling and hitting.
- Use distraction to help them find something else to do.
- When asking them to do something, ask yourself, “Are they able to do this task?”
- Say things in a positive way, such as, “Your feet belong on the floor, not on the chair.”

Your facial expressions and tone of voice are important. If you are feeling mad or upset, take a break before dealing with your child. There is more than one way to help a child behave and something that is successful in one situation may not work in another.

Helping them learn how to behave can be stressful at times. If you have questions and would like to talk to someone, contact your county health department and ask to speak to a Child Guidance professional.



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