

Discipline – the positive discipline flow chart

By Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator, Bellevue College. www.gooddayswithkids.com

What is discipline?

Discipline does not mean punishment after misbehavior has happened.

Discipline means guidance. It means setting clear expectations for how we would like our children to behave, not just assuming they instinctively know how to behave. It means modelling for our children the kinds of behavior we want them to display. It means setting clear limits about things they cannot do. And, it means that when they misbehave, we let them know that the behavior was not OK, but we do still love them, and we tell them how to be better in the future. This style of discipline not only guides behavior, it also builds trust and respect between parent and child.

Make sure your expectations are developmentally appropriate

During early childhood, your child is going through massive developmental changes, with more brain growth than ever again. They learn through hands-on exploration of the world, which means they get into everything, and don't have a clear sense yet of what is safe and what's not. Your role is to protect them as needed, but also allow them to explore and learn within limits. They learn through repetition, which means they need to do something over and over to learn it, and that includes misbehaving over and over and experiencing consequences over and over before they really learn the rule. Your role is respond consistently each and every time to help reinforce their learning.

Discipline will be more effective (and you'll be less frustrated) if you keep your child's developmental capabilities in mind. Do encourage them to stretch themselves and *work on* impulse control, but don't expect more than they can do. For example, typically toddlers are not capable of sharing, have a hard time controlling their impulses, will bite and hit, and can't always "use their words." Learn about capabilities by reading books, looking online, taking classes, and watching other kids. (Remember that individual temperaments have a big effect on what kids are capable of, no matter their age.)

[Learn more: Discipline that works: Ages & Stages Approach: www.umext.maine.edu/onlinepubs/PDFpubs/4140.pdf]

Step 1: Setting the Stage for Good Behavior / Preventing Misbehavior

Set your child up to succeed: A well-rested, well-fed child will be a better behaved child. A child who understands what's happening will be a better behaved child. Predictable routines make every day more manageable – what routines can you establish to minimize behavior issues? It's especially helpful to have routines for transitions – when you need them to stop doing one thing and start another. [Learn more about routines: <http://bellevuetoddlers.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/dailyrituals.pdf>]

Maximize child-friendly opportunities where you can say yes

- Create a play area where everything is age appropriate, and where it's OK to be messy.
- Have times each day where your child sets the agenda and gets to play however he wants to.
- Give a bored child something to do. Bring things with you to distract her in the grocery store, the bank, etc. Get her engaged in the activity before you start yours. If you're frustrated by a repeating problem (like when he makes a mess every time you're cooking), preempt that by setting up appropriate activities for that time and place). Ask for his "help" with the work.
- When planning your day think about the natural rhythm of your child's day. When are they active and ready for engaging activity? When are they quiet but happy, and content to go along for some errands? If you need your child to sit still later in the day, can you make sure they get plenty of physical activity early in the day?
- Minimize predictable problems: If there's one environment, or playmate, or circumstance that always brings out the worst in your child, can you avoid it? Or take it on only when your child is rested, fed, and healthy (and you are too)?

Explain what to expect, and what is expected of them

Remember how little children know about the world. They don't know you're supposed to be quiet in some places and it's OK to be loud in other places until you teach them that. They don't know that they need to stay at the table at the restaurant until you teach them that. The more you can tell them ahead of time what to expect and what is expected, the better. When they are young, keep it simple: "this is a quiet place", "you need to sit with me here". You can have codes. For example, "theater rules" means a place where you sit in a seat and are quiet, unless everyone else claps or sings.

"Catch" them being good: Praise them for positive behavior. Try for a ratio of 4 – 5 times where you tell them they're doing something right for every 1 time you tell them they're doing something wrong.

Step 2: When Misbehavior Begins, Think Before You React

Is there Risk of Harm? Handling Quickly Escalating Situations

When anyone (or anything) is in imminent danger of harm, we need to act quickly, not do a lot of talking. Also, if your child is in a full meltdown tantrum or very wild and out of control, you won't be able to reason with them. They're not understanding language at that point. You may just need to remove them from the situation, go somewhere quiet till they calm down, and then explain things.

Is it just annoying? All parents have cranky moments, where little things bug us. Before you scold a child, decide whether something's actually a problem or if it's just annoying. Can you ignore it?

See things from your child's perspective – Can we let it happen this one time?

Children love to explore but sometimes that means a big mess. Try to see things from your child's perspective to see the joy they may have found. And to see that they might not have realized it would be a problem. Once I turned away from my kids for just a few minutes. When I turned back, they had stripped naked, and covered their bodies with mud. My immediate reaction was to be upset. Instead I said "This made a huge mess, and I'm never going to let you do it again. But, I can see it's great fun. Go ahead and keep playing now. Revel in the experience! Then we'll clean up together."

Pick your Battles – Is this really a problem, or is it OK?

As much as possible, think ahead of time about what the limits are. But sometimes you find yourself in an unexpected situation... think it through before acting. Once my daughter wanted to wear dress-up clothes to the grocery store. I said no, which turned into a battle of wills. Halfway through, I realized I didn't care. But at that point, I couldn't back down – I had to stick to the rule. What I *should* have started with was "Hmm... I need to think about that and decide if that is OK with me."

Some parents have 3 categories. Green light behaviors are always OK, parents can always say yes. Red lights are never OK, and they can never say yes, no matter what. (e.g. safety issues) And there's a lot of yellow lights: things that are sometimes OK, and sometimes not. When their child asks "Can I wear my swimsuit today" they might say "hmm... that's a yellow light. Let's think it through: if it's warm out and we're playing outside, that's OK. But, today, since it's so cold out, I have to say no."

If things are pretty calm, but you decide you need to intervene, move on to:

Step 3: Tell Your Child What You Want Them to Do (instead of what NOT to do)

We need to ask for the behavior we want to see. Toddlers don't understand the word "don't" very well, so if you say "don't bite", they hear the verb, and continue to bite. Also, even if they grasp what they *shouldn't* do, they may not be able to think of an alternative for what they *should* do.

Connect to Correct: Don't call out suggestions from across the room. Go close to your child, establish eye contact, and *then* give suggestions. Engage them in a new activity before moving away.

Model: Act the way you would like your child to act. Also, point out other kids who are behaving well. Children are great at copying what they see. "Let's touch the doggy gently. See, this is gentle."
"Watch how I walk carefully down the stairs, and I get to jump off the very last stair."

Re-direct: Tell them what other action they could do with that object. So instead of “don’t pour the rice on the floor”, say “keep the rice in the bowl.” Instead of “Don’t drop that!!” say “Hold it very carefully” and say “when you’re ready to set it down, I’ll take it from you.”

Substitute: Tell them what other object they can do that action with. “I can see you’re in the mood for throwing. Let’s go find a ball.” “I can see you want to bang on things. Where’s your drum?” Sometimes it’s delayed substitution: “I know you want to jump and run today. Later, we’ll go to the playground and you can do that all you want. For now, I need you to sit quietly.”

Offer Choices: “You have 3 cars. Bobby wants to play with one. Which one do you want to give him?”

Note: don’t offer choices to a child who is very upset. It will only make it harder for her to calm herself down. A tantrum-ing child needs to be given clear direction about what to do.

Explain the Reasons: “I want you to stop banging on that, because it might break. That would make us sad.” “I need you to be safe. When you go head first down a slide, it can hurt you. Go feet first.”

Step 4: Alert Child to Problem, Set Limits and Consequences

If re-directing and substituting didn’t work, or the situation is escalating: Let her know that what she is doing is not OK. (She might not know. Or she might, and is testing to be sure she understands.) Use a firm voice and a serious expression to convey this. It is confusing to children if we use our regular sweet smile and playful voice when we’re telling them what not to do. Also, the louder and more upset your child gets, the calmer and more grounded you need to be. If they’re feeling out of control of themselves, that can be scary. Seeing you in control is reassuring.

Remind them what the expectations are and encourage them to behave better. If they don’t, let them know what the consequences will be if misbehavior continues. Try for logical consequences, where the ‘punishment fits the crime.’ The most common consequences fall into two categories: remove the child from the situation until they can behave well, or remove options from the child (i.e. take away toys, buckle them into high chair, prevent them from using the slide.) Make sure the consequence is in proportion to the issue. Some examples: “when you throw your Legos, I need to put them away for the day” or “when you don’t stop when I say red light, I need to carry you to keep you safe” or “I need you to help put away toys. If I put them away all by myself, I will put them up high on a shelf out of reach” or “when you dump your food on the floor, it tells me you’re done, and I’ll put it away.”

Step 5: Calmly Enforce Consequences

If the misbehavior continues, you must impose the consequence. Although it’s hard to “punish” a child, it actually builds more trust if you do what you said you would do than if you “let it slide.”

Your role is to be the authority who helps your child stay safe and grow into the best adult they can be. Although you can be friendly to your child (and loving at all times), you can’t always be their friend. Sometimes you have to be the “bad guy” who blocks them from doing what they want.

Punish the behavior, not the child. Let them know you still love them, but the behavior was not OK. Use a calm and firm voice and expression, not an angry tone.

No need to discuss this or re-hash it or re-negotiate it. Just be clear and move on.

Step 6: Moving On

Once your child has calmed down, they can return to the situation, or you can give back options you had taken away. You can remind them of what is expected, and tell them what TO DO in the future.

Over time, we want our children to learn self-discipline, so as they get older, we need to “fade” back a little. We ask *them* to tell *us* what the appropriate behavior is for a situation, we wait a little longer to correct, we let them experience some of the problems we’ve warned them about (instead of always protecting them from consequences), and take more responsibility for behaving properly.

The Discipline Flowchart

