

Discipline

By Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator, Bellevue College. <http://bellevuetoddlers.wordpress.com>

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 assuming they know how. It means modelling for our children the kinds of behavior we would like 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.

The first step in discipline is to consider how old your child is...

Make sure your expectations are developmentally appropriate

From birth to three, 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 have no 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 remember the rule. Your role is respond consistently each and every time to misbehavior 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 at all times. Do encourage them to stretch themselves and *work on* impulse control, but don't expect more than they are capable of. Learn about developmental capabilities by reading books, looking online, taking classes, and by watching other kids. (Though it's also important to remember that individual temperaments have a big effect on what kids are capable of, no matter their age.) For example, typically toddlers are not yet capable of sharing, have a hard time waiting and controlling their impulses, will bite and hit at times, and can't always "use their words."

Learn more: www.askdrsears.com/topics/parenting/discipline-behavior/9-development-reasons-why-toddlers-can-be-difficult-discipline

Explain what to expect, and what is expected of them

Remember how little your children know about the world. They don't know that you're supposed to be quiet in some places and that 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 (and remind them again and again). The more you can tell them ahead of time what to expect and what is expected, the better. When they are young, keep it very simple: "this is a quiet place", "you need to sit with me here". As they get older, you can have codes. Like in our family "theater rules" means a place where you sit in a seat, and are quiet, unless everyone else is clapping or singing.

Model desired behavior and praise them when they manage it

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.

When you make mistakes, say so, and apologize for it. "I tell you not to use bad words, and I just used a bad word. I need to work harder on using nice words."

"Catch" them being good – praise them for the positive behavior they demonstrate. Some people recommend you shoot 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.

Setting Limits and Consequences

When misbehavior begins, let them know that what they're doing is not OK. (They might not know. Or they might, and are testing to be sure they understand.) Use a firm voice and a serious expression to convey this. It is confusing to toddlers if we use our regular sweet smile and playful voice when we're telling them what not to do. Also, the louder your child gets, the calmer you need to be.

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.' For example: "when you throw your Duplos, I need to put them away" 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."

Consistently Follow through on 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."

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.

Handling Quickly Escalating Situations (including hitting and biting)

When anyone (or anything) is in imminent danger of harm, we need to act more quickly. There may not be time to suggest better behavior nor time to tell them what the consequences will be. You may just need to act quickly and explain later.

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.

How does your child respond to your no's? How do you respond to that?

When you set a limit, does your child beg, whine, and plead? Or throw loud dramatic tantrums? Or try to make you feel like a bad parent, shouting "you don't love me!?" If so, do you give in? If you do, you teach your child that whining, tantrums, and guilt trips are effective tools and they will use them again. And the toddler tantrums that seemed overwhelming at the time won't compare to the battle your teenager will be able to put on after years of learning how effective tantrums are against you.

Try to stick to your no, no matter what. If you change your mind for some reason, be very clear about why "I'm not saying yes to this because you begged for it. I'm saying yes because I talked it over with your dad, and now that we've had more time to think about it, it seems fair to do. In return, here's what we expect from you..."

Remember that giving in can make things easier in the moment, but it doesn't accomplish your long-term goals, and can reinforce behaviors you dislike. Sticking to your consequences can be *really* hard sometimes. One year we had to bar our daughter from participating in a school play – something the whole family was looking forward to – due to one really bad week of homework issues. My husband and I were a strong united front in her presence, and did our own grieving behind the scenes.

Discipline Tactics that are Less Effective

- **Avoid empty threats**: Saying "I'll just leave you here in the store" or "I'll throw away all your toys" can be very frightening to a child and scare them out of proportion with the offense. Then someday they figure out you don't mean it, and then it's pointless. Either way, it's not effective at helping the child behave the way you want him to.

- What about spanking? Murray Straus, after 4 decades of research, says “Research shows spanking corrects misbehavior. But ... spanking does not work better than other modes of correction... Moreover... the gains from spanking come at a big cost. These include weakening the tie between children and parents and increasing the probability that the child will hit other children and their parents, and as adults, hit a... partner. Spanking also...lowers the probability of a child doing well in school.” www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/12/131211103958.htm
- What about time-outs?
 - Time outs work very well for some families. It depends on the temperament of the child and of the parent. Successful time-outs are not a punishment. They are a chance for a child to go somewhere quiet and calm down. They come back out when they’re ready to get along again. A typical rule of thumb is for a maximum time-out of one minute per year old. So a 5 year old would have at most 5 minutes.
 - If your child views a time out as a rejection, it might make her very sad. That child might need a “time-in” where the two of you sit quietly together until she calms down.
 - Some children view timeouts as a call to battle, and they only escalate the situation.
 - Some parents take time-outs themselves, saying “I need to go to my room for just a minute to calm down, then I’ll come back and we’ll talk about this.”

Think before reacting - Pick your Battles

As much as possible, think ahead of time about what the limits are. But sometimes you find yourself in a situation where you need to set a limit in the moment... take a little while to think it through before acting. For example, my first daughter wanted to wear her dress-up clothes to the grocery store. I said no, which turned into a battle of wills. Halfway through, I realized I really didn’t care. But at that point, I couldn’t just back down – I had to stick to the rule I had set. So, what I *should* have done is when she asked for something I didn’t expect, I should have said “Hmm... I need to think about that for a minute and decide if that seems OK with me.”

Some parents have tried a system where they have in their minds three categories of behavior. Green light options: things that are always OK, that they can always say yes to. Red light options are never OK, and they can never say yes to them, no matter how much the child asks or how embarrassing the public tantrum may be. (Safety issues are a good example.) And there’s a whole lot of yellow lights: things that are sometimes OK, and sometimes not. Then when their child asks them “Can I wear my swimsuit today” they might say “hmm... that’s a yellow light thing. Let’s think it through: if it’s warm out and we’re playing outside, that’s OK. But it’s not OK if it’s cold out or we’re going somewhere like church. So, today, since it’s so cold out, I have to say no.”

Think before reacting – See things from your child’s perspective

Children love to explore but sometimes that means they make a big mess. Before getting upset, try to see things from your child’s perspective to see the joy they may have found in making that mess. And try to see that they might not have realized that the mess would be a problem. Say “It looks like you had a lot of fun playing and exploring here! But, next time you want to play with that, we need to figure out how to do it without making a big mess. Can you help me clean up now?”

Helpful resources

Webinar on Positive Discipline: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sX0MQ5ZXVio&list=WLSMLXfBPSxoG3J_FkZGqnxVV2P34cr_S

Overview Handout: www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-discipline.pdf

8 tools for babies/toddlers. www.askdrsears.com/topics/parenting/discipline-behavior/8-tools-toddler-discipline

Tantrums: <http://bellevuetoddlers.wordpress.com/2013/11/14/toddler-tantrums-and-emotional-meltdowns/>

If you have a hard time saying no, check out:

www.empoweringparents.com/saying-no-to-your-child-how-to-be-a-more-assertive-parent.php?&key=Effective-Parenting

www.empoweringparents.com/No-Means-No-How-to-Teach-Your-Child-that-You-Mean-Business.php#ixzz2rUqTBC9