

Three Discipline Tools to Try

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“Kids Do Well If They Can”

I encourage you to use that mantra, which is based on the work of psychologist Ross Greene. Kids want to be good. If they are not behaving well, it's often because they lack some skill or some resource to help them succeed.

Next time you find yourself thinking about your child “why won't they _____”, try changing that to “why can't they _____? Maybe they need to learn _____ or maybe I could help them by _____.”

There are times where you may be tempted to argue “but they CAN do it, they know how... they just won't!” I encourage you to still think this through. For example, if you said “They know how to clean up their toys, but they won't”, I would encourage you to think about how much executive function it takes to clean up – you have to know where everything goes, you have to be able to decide what to put away first, you have to keep your attention on the task for a long time while managing lots of distractions. It's hard work for a young brain. You can help them by giving clear and specific instructions. Instead of “clean up all your toys”, say “first, I need you to put all the blocks in the basket.” When that's done, tell them the next step. You can also help by creating picture labels for shelves and baskets to help them remember where things go, and making up a task chart that breaks the clean-up task into four steps, each with a picture illustrating it. I can't promise that if you do these things, they will immediately start cleaning up after themselves, but it is much more likely that they'll succeed at it when you remind them of the steps to take.

The Attention Principle

Children want attention, so they repeat behaviors that get your attention. If you give positive attention for positive behaviors, you will see more of those behaviors. So, if your child is: calm, playing happily by themselves or with others, keeping things tidy, taking care of their things, sharing, helping out, or anything positive, be sure to notice! Positive attention includes smiles, hugs, thank you's, verbal appreciation that's specific about what they're doing well (“I really like it when you...”), spending time together, and praising them in front of other people.

If children are missing your attention, they will take actions to get it. If you don't respond to positive bids for attention, they'll make negative bids: tantrums, whining,

hitting, dumping things out of containers, and so on. If you give a lot of attention to these behaviors, you prove they're effective, and your child will do them more often.

If your child is just doing something annoying, ignore it. For example, with whining, you could ignore them or you could give a calm tip "I'm having a hard time hearing you because of the whining voice. When you ask nicely, I'll help you", then blandly turn away. As soon as they ask nicely, smile and say "of course."

Some misbehavior can't be ignored, like hurting the dog or a sibling. Set limits and give consequences, but don't let it create a lot of drama. If they can make you scream at them, that's exciting and absolutely feeds the bad behavior monster. Instead you may calmly say "It's not OK to hurt anyone. Please go to your room for a few minutes." Then turn away. Later on, as soon as you see positive behavior, give positive attention.

Use When / Then Statements

We tend to ask our child nicely to do something, but then when that doesn't work, we jump straight to an "if/then" threat. "If you don't get ready for bed, then I won't read you a bedtime story." Instead, try FIRST using when/then. "When you've brushed your teeth, then we get to read stories together."

If/then statements, of "If you [do this bad thing], then I am going to [enforce this consequence]" assume that they will misbehave and set you up as an adversary.

When/then statements, of "When you [do this good thing], then we get to [do this good thing together]" assumes they want to do well, and reinforces your alliance – letting them know that "in our family, we all work together to create a happy life."

Now, sometimes we *do* need to use an if/then and impose consequences. But... starting with a when / then and only using if/then when you need to is better for the relationship, and better for your long-term construction project of building a good human who works with other people toward mutual goals.