

# The Foundations of Discipline

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## **Trust and Respect**

Respect your child's capabilities, but also respect their limitations. Remember they are little, they're still learning impulse control, and the part of their brain that will help them always make good decisions won't be developed till their late teens!

Trust that your child is a good person, and if they're misbehaving it could be due to lack of knowledge or to an unmet need. Psychologist Ross Greene has a mantra: "Kids Do Well If They Can." I encourage you to use that mantra. Your child wants to be good. If they're not behaving well, it's often because they lack some skill or some resource to help them succeed. Or they have an unmet need they can't articulate that distracts them from good behavior.

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 \_\_\_\_\_. Or maybe they're too hungry / tired / stressed to do this right now."

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", then 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, or 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.

## **Let Your Child Know What to Expect and What's Expected Of Them - Routines**

One of the keys to your child behaving well is that they have to understand what it means to behave well! And they need your help figuring out that "behaving well" at the doctor's office looks different than behaving well at the playground. It's a lot to sort out.

The more you can communicate to them about where you'll go, what the plans are, and how they should behave, the better your child's chance at success. Especially if you're entering a new environment that isn't as child-friendly as it could be (like a theater, a restaurant, or a doctor's office), it is very helpful to prepare your child in advance for what to expect.

One of the most helpful tools is to set up daily routines. Children feel confident and are more independent when they know where things are, how things work, and what their "job" is. So, if any part of your day or week tends to be challenging, step back and put some thought into how you could create routines that help it go better. Transitions from one activity to another tend to be the hard spots for most young children, so think through these times.

### **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 them. 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.

So, if your child is doing something that's not a big deal, it's just 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. I'm going to take the dog to another room for a few minutes." Then walk away. Later on, as soon as you see positive behavior, give positive attention.

### **Use When / Then Statements**

We tend to ask our child to do something, and if they don't, we jump to an "if/then" threat. "If you don't get ready for bed, then I won't read you a story." 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 negative 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 sets you up as team-mates with common goals – 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 will be better for the relationship, and better for your long-term project of raising a good human.