

# Discipline: Teaching Your Child HOW to Behave Well

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Children want to behave well. Sometimes they just need more guidance on how to do that. Here are some ways to guide your child to the behavior you would like to see.

## **Role Model**

Act the way you would like your child to act. Children are great at copying what they see. "Let's touch the doggy gently. See, this is gentle." "Do you see how I use my fork instead of my fingers?" "Watch how I walk carefully down the stairs, and then I get to jump off just the very last stair."

Be careful not to model behavior you don't want to see. If you don't want them to use bad words, maybe you need to watch your own language. If you don't want them to eat crackers straight out of the box, maybe you should get a bowl when you snack.

## **Tell them what TO DO**

It's easy to jump to saying "don't do that!" It's important to know that young children don't always understand the word "don't" very well, so if you say "don't throw that", they may hear the verb in that sentence more than they hear the don't, and may throw.

Also, even if they understand what you don't want them to do, and can stop themselves from doing it, they may not be able to figure out on their own an alternative for what they *could* do. Saying "don't dump that on the floor" it's not as effective as saying "keep the rice in the dish."

So, when your child is holding something fragile, instead of saying "Don't drop it!!" say "Hold it very carefully." Instead of saying "Don't throw that!" say "when you're ready to set it down, let me know and I'll take it." Instead of "Don't Run", say "please walk" or "can you tiptoe very slowly?"

## **Re-Direct**

Tell them *what other action they could do with an object*. Instead of "don't pour water on the floor", say "pour water on the rubber ducky." Instead of "don't kick the book", say "can you pick up the book and hand it to me?" Instead of "don't pound the piano", say "use one finger."

## **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 knock things over because it makes a fun noise. Later today, we'll build big towers of blocks we can knock over."

## **Use specific language about what behavior you want to see and why**

Instead of just "no", try "careful", "gentle", "soft touch", "slow feet." "Hands up, that's hot."

"I want you to be safe on the slide in the playground. If you sit on your bottom and put your feet down first, that will help keep you safe." or "I want you to stop banging on that, because it might break and we would have to throw it away. Show me how you can be gentle with it."

## **Connect to Correct**

Don't call out commands from across the room. Go close to your child, get down to their level and establish eye contact, then give suggestions. Engage them in the new activity before moving on.

Also connect emotionally. Spending time listening to their stories about their experience, and validating their emotions helps them to feel heard. Let your child know that it's OK to experience big feelings and that all feelings are OK. But some behaviors are not. So, you might say "I understand why you're mad. We all get mad sometimes. But it's never OK to hit your friend."

### **Offer Choices**

When you offer choices, it can help them build their decision-making skills, and reduce power struggles by giving them some sense of control. But offering choices doesn't mean the child has total control, where you throw open a cabinet (literally or metaphorically) and anything goes.

Instead, the parent will first think through what options would be acceptable. Those are the options you lay out for the child, then they decide which of those acceptable options to choose.

Some parents make the mistake of offering too many options, which can be overwhelming for a little one. Too many overwhelming choices in one day will lead to meltdowns. A good rule of thumb for little ones is to offer just one decision at a time, and for that decision, offer as many options as the child is years old. A 2 year old chooses between the red shirt and the blue shirt. (And you just put a pair of pants on them without them having to also make that decision.) A 3 year old chooses between cereal, toast, or yogurt. (You decide what dish to use, and where they sit.) A 4 year old has four bedtime stories to choose between. (You decide that they'll brush teeth before you read the story.)

As the child gets older, you may offer more choices, but give them criteria you would use to help make a good decision. Talking through this decision-making process helps them build the skills to do this independently later on. "It's going to rain today – what would be good clothes to wear?"

Don't offer choices to a child in the middle of a huge meltdown. At that point, they're in their "downstairs brain" and not capable of having a rational discussion and making decisions.

Don't offer choices to bribe a child out of a tantrum. Imagine you're in a store and your child asks you to buy an expensive toy, and you say no, and they meltdown, and then you say "OK, fine – you can have one of these cheap toys – do you want the dog or the monkey?" Your child has now learned an effective technique to bully you into getting them something. Instead, if you're willing to buy a cheap toy, tell them that going in. "If you can behave well while I do my shopping, then I will let you choose one toy. But it has to be something little and it has to cost less than \_\_\_\_." If you're not willing, don't offer. Say "We have to buy a birthday present for your friend today, but we're not buying anything for you. But if you can behave well, and we can do this quickly, then we'll be able to play in the playground for a little while when we're done shopping."

Again, you're in control of what options are on the table. They choose between those options.

### **If not now, then when? If not here, then where?**

If they can't do something now, but it will be ok later, then instead of saying no, you can say "you can have a cookie later, after you eat lunch. First, we're going to play some more."

If this is not the time or place for something, tell them when it will be "it's not OK to climb on the furniture here, but later today we can go to the playground and you can climb there."

It's important to give your child plenty of opportunities to be a child: to run, to play, to be silly, and be loud. If they know they'll have other times in the day that are "yes times" when they get to do the things they want to do, they can be more patient with the times when you need to say no and put a lot of limits on their behavior.

And throughout the day, knowing that they have your love, trust, and respect will help them want to do the best they can to honor that.