

# Disciplining Your Child

(Reviewed by: Lauren M. O'Donnell, PsyD)

Whatever your child's age, it's important to be consistent when it comes to discipline. If parents don't stick to the rules and consequences they set up, their kids aren't likely to either.

Here are some ideas about how to vary your approach to discipline to best fit your family.

## **Ages 0 to 2**

Babies and toddlers are naturally curious. So it's wise to eliminate temptations and no-nos — items such as TVs and video equipment, stereos, jewelry, and especially cleaning supplies and medicines should be kept well out of reach.

When your crawling baby or roving toddler heads toward an unacceptable or dangerous play object, calmly say "No" and either remove your child from the area or distract him or her with an appropriate activity.

Timeouts can be effective discipline for toddlers. A child who has been hitting, biting, or throwing food, for example, should be told why the behavior is unacceptable and taken to a designated timeout area — a kitchen chair or bottom stair — for a minute or two to calm down (longer timeouts are not effective for toddlers).

It's important to not spank, hit, or slap a child of any age. Babies and toddlers are especially unlikely to be able to make any connection between their behavior and physical punishment. They will only feel the pain of the hit.

And don't forget that kids learn by watching adults, particularly their parents. Make sure your behavior is role-model material. You'll make a much stronger impression by putting your own belongings away rather than just issuing orders to your child to pick up toys while your stuff is left strewn around.

## **Ages 3 to 5**

As your child grows and begins to understand the connection between actions and consequences, make sure you start communicating the rules of your family's home.

Explain to kids what you expect of them **before** you punish them for a behavior. The first time your 3-year-old uses crayons to decorate the living room wall, discuss why that's not allowed and what will happen if your child does it again (for instance, your child will have to help clean the wall and will not be able to use the crayons for the rest of the day). If the wall gets decorated again a few days later, issue a reminder that crayons are for paper only and then enforce the consequences.

The earlier that parents establish this kind of "I set the rules and you're expected to listen or accept the consequences" standard, the better for everyone. Although it's sometimes easier for parents to ignore occasional bad behavior or not follow through on some threatened punishment, this sets a bad precedent. Empty threats undermine your authority as a parent, and make it more likely that kids will test limits. Consistency is the key to effective discipline, and it's important for parents to decide (together, if you are not a single parent) what the rules are and then uphold them.

While you become clear on what behaviors will be punished, don't forget to reward good behaviors. Don't underestimate the positive effect that your praise can have — discipline is not just about punishment, but also about recognizing good behavior. For example, saying "I'm proud of you for sharing your toys at playgroup" is usually more effective than punishing a child who didn't share. And be specific when giving praise rather than just saying "Good job!" You want to make it clear which behaviors you liked. This makes them more likely to happen in the future — the more attention we give to a behavior, the more likely it is to continue.

If your child continues an unacceptable behavior no matter what you do, try making a chart with a box for each day of the week. Decide how many times your child can misbehave before a punishment kicks in or how long the proper behavior must be seen before it is rewarded. Post the chart on the refrigerator and then track the good and unacceptable behaviors every day. This will give your child (and you) a concrete look at how it's going. Once this begins to work, praise your child for learning to control misbehavior and, especially, for overcoming any stubborn problem.

Timeouts also can work well for kids at this age. Pick a suitable timeout place, such as a chair or bottom step, that's free of distractions. Remember, getting sent to your room isn't effective if a computer, TV, or games are there. Also, a timeout is time away from any type of reinforcement. So your child shouldn't get any attention from you while in a timeout — including talking, eye contact, etc.

Be sure to consider the length of time that will work best for your child. Experts say 1 minute for each year of age is a good rule of thumb; others recommend using the timeout until the child is calmed down (to teach self-regulation). Make sure that if a timeout happens because your child didn't follow directions, you follow through with the direction after the timeout.

It's important to tell kids what the right thing to do is, not just to say what the wrong thing is. For example, instead of saying "Don't jump on the couch," try "Please sit on the furniture and put your feet on the floor."

Be sure to give clear, direct commands. Instead of "Could you please put your shoes on?" say "Please put your shoes on." This leaves no room for confusion and does not imply that following directions is a choice.

## **Ages 6 to 8**

Timeouts and consequences are also effective discipline strategies for this age group.

Again, consistency is crucial, as is follow-through. Make good on any promises of discipline or else you risk undermining your authority. Kids have to believe that you mean what you say. This is not to say you can't give second chances or allow a certain margin of error, but for the most part, you should act on what you say.

Be careful not to make unrealistic threats of punishment ("Slam that door and you'll never watch TV again!") in anger, since not following through could weaken **all** your threats. If you threaten to turn the car around and go home if the squabbling in the backseat doesn't stop, make sure you do exactly that. The credibility you'll gain with your kids is much more valuable than a lost beach day.

Huge punishments may take away your power as a parent. If you ground your son or daughter for a month, your child may not feel motivated to change behaviors because everything has already been taken away. It may help to set some goals that kids can meet to earn back privileges that were taken away for misbehavior.

## **Ages 9 to 12**

Kids in this age group — just as with all ages — can be disciplined with natural consequences. As they mature and request more independence and responsibility, teaching them to deal with the consequences of their behavior is an effective and appropriate method of discipline.

For example, if your child's homework isn't done before bedtime, should you make him or her stay up to do it or even lend a hand yourself? Probably not — you'll miss an opportunity to teach a key life lesson. If homework is incomplete, your child will go to school the next day without it and suffer the resulting bad grade.

It's natural for parents to want to rescue kids from mistakes, but in the long run they do kids a favor by letting them fail sometimes. Kids see what behaving improperly can mean and probably won't make those mistakes again. However, if your child does not seem to be learning from natural consequences, set up some of your own to help change the behavior. Removing privileges such as electronics can be an effective consequence for this age group.

## **Ages 13 and Up**

By now you've laid the groundwork. Your child knows what's expected and that you mean what you say about the penalties for bad behavior. Don't let down your guard now — discipline is just as important for teens as it is for younger kids. Just as with the 4-year-old who needs you to set a bedtime and enforce it, your teen needs boundaries, too.

Set up rules regarding homework, visits by friends, curfews, and dating and discuss them beforehand with your teenager so there will be no misunderstandings. Your teen will probably complain from time to time, but also will realize that you're in control. Believe it or not, teens still want and need you to set limits and enforce order in their lives, even as you grant them greater freedom and responsibility.

When your teen **does** break a rule, taking away privileges may seem the best plan of action. While it's fine to take away the car for a week, for example, be sure to also discuss why coming home an hour past curfew is unacceptable and worrisome.

Remember to give a teenager some control over things. Not only will this limit the number of power struggles you have, it will help your teen respect the decisions that you do need to make. You could allow a younger teen to make decisions concerning school clothes, hair styles, or even the condition of his or her room. As your teen gets older, that realm of control might be extended to include an occasional relaxed curfew.

It's also important to focus on the positives. For example, have your teen earn a later curfew by demonstrating positive behavior instead of setting an earlier curfew as punishment for irresponsible behavior.

### **A Word About Spanking**

Perhaps no form of discipline is more controversial than spanking. Here are some reasons why experts discourage spanking:

- Spanking teaches kids that it's OK to hit when they're angry.
- Spanking can physically harm children.
- Rather than teaching kids how to change their behavior, spanking makes them fearful of their parents and teaches them to avoid getting caught.
- For kids seeking attention by acting out, spanking may "reward" them — negative attention is better than no attention at all.