

What Every Parent Should Know About Discipline

One of the most frequent questions I hear is how do I get my child to behave and respect me? It is important to understand some of the advanced techniques of positive parenting if you are to succeed at this.

Young children are beginners! They have lots to learn and one of the biggest "lessons" they must learn is how to behave or act in an acceptable manner. Learning this lesson is not easy and it takes years to do it.

Caregivers, like parents, must be patient and must expect children to make mistakes - that is, do things that are not acceptable. We also must remember that children do not have mini-computers in their heads. They often forget a rule, or they get so involved in doing something, they get distracted and do something they ordinarily wouldn't do.

We can help children learn how to behave. We should think about teaching a child "how to behave" in much the same way as we help children learn other things. For example, there are good ways to help a child learn how to eat, and there are some ways that are not good.

Think about helping a child learn about finger paint. Let's imagine these children had never seen finger paint before. Hardly any caregiver would ever think of just putting out lots of

paint in front of this group of young children without some guidance. A top-notch caregiver might talk about finger paint, show the children its consistency, and probably demonstrate how to use it on paper. The caregiver probably would give the children a few cautions about not throwing or slopping the paint or not dumping the entire jar of paint on the paper. No caregiver would simply put out the open finger paint jars and go do something else. She would watch carefully, making appropriate and encouraging comments about what the children are doing. Every one of you, if you were in this situation, would be patient, and would not yell if the child accidentally dropped some paint on the floor. You'd calmly tell the child to get a paper towel and wipe it up. You would realize the child is learning, and that the child is a beginner in this business of using finger paints.

Helping a child learn what is acceptable behavior is much like helping a child learn about finger painting. It takes patience; it takes repeating, and it takes firmness. In our example, if the child deliberately turns the jar upside-down and dumps the paint onto the floor, you would talk with the child and probably end the finger painting activity. But you would do it calmly, and you would understand that the child is not ready, at least today, to do finger painting.

So it is with behavior. The one big difference is that behavior is occurring all the time. Unlike finger painting, you can't tell the children, "Now we are going to behave!" Why? Because they are behaving all the time. You meet new situations all the time. So do they. They don't always know or remember how to act. Because you are an adult, you developed some skills that will enable you to deal with most of the situations you run into. Remember, children are beginners. They don't have much experience. Most situations children face are new.

THREE BASIC SKILLS

We're going to discuss three basic skills. If you master these, your life with the children will be much calmer. These skills will enable you to enjoy the children. More importantly though you will be helping them learn.

1. You'll learn about rules and how to establish them.
2. You'll learn about consistency.
3. You'll learn to use "time-out."

There are many ways to teach children how to act in an appropriate way. Some refer to this teaching as "discipline." Unfortunately, to some the word discipline is harsh. To them it means yelling, screaming, saying "NO" over and over, and in extreme cases, some people think discipline only means something physical. You may know a parent who says, "When I discipline, I smack her bottom." being a good caregiver and a top-notch professional, you know that yelling, screaming, repeatedly saying "NO," or hitting a child are not effective ways to discipline or teach good behavior.

RULES - MAKING THEM AND ENFORCING THEM

Children need rules. Rules help a child feel secure. When young children have rules, they know what is expected of them. Rules need to be carefully thought out and NOT made up on the spur of the moment when you run out of patience or don't feel well.

1. You must first decide what is important and what you absolutely don't want the children to do or what you want them to do. Rules are usually based on the child's and the safety of other

children, yourself, and your home. (It's a good idea to write down all of these important do's and don'ts.) For example. You do not want the children to go upstairs alone. They may only go up with you when it's time to take their naps. "Not going upstairs alone" will be a rule in your home. You will not allow children to run through the house. It's dangerous, and they might slip and hurt themselves. That's another rule.

2. Now list your rules. Make certain you do not have too many. How many is too many? That depends on you, the children, and your house. The point is, try not to have rules that include non-important matters. For example. If you find you make a rule about not touching a valuable vase that sits on the coffee table that happens to be in the area the children use, that rule might not be enforceable. It's much better not to make a rule and move the vase to a safer area within your home. An example of a non-important rule might be "don't touch or draw on the cold, frosted window." In most cases, running a finger down a window that has moisture on it fascinates a child. In fact, such a window offers a wonderful example that you can use to help the child learn about moisture in the home and what happens when it's cold outside and warm inside. Generally speaking, running a finger down a window will not harm the child, you, or the window. It's a great opportunity for the child to explore a basic principle of science.

3. Post the rules. Go over the rules with children. Use the old method of tell, tell, and tell. Remember children need repetition. Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them what you've already told them! Demonstrate as much as you can what you mean when you say the rule. For example, "There will be no running in the house." Children are creative, and they still try to see how fast they can walk. Is this what you mean? Actually, let them run and tell them "that's what running is."

4. Inform the parents of the rules. Make certain they understand not only the rules but also why you have each rule. Be willing to

compromise if a parent questions a rule. Don't get defensive. Admit to yourself, you may have included an unreasonable rule. Be willing to change it.

5. As you make the rules, figure out what will happen if a child breaks the rule. If Joe runs through the house, what will happen to Joe? What consequences will follow Joe's breaking of the rule?

6. Tell the children the consequences of breaking the rules. Make certain they understand that if they run, they will "not be able to use the room they ran in" or they will "have to sit down for five minutes." Letting children suffer the consequences is a "hassle-free" way to discipline young people. Children learn from experiences, just like adults. We call it learning the "hard way." Children learn that every act has a consequence. And they learn to be responsible. Children must understand that they have choices and must accept the consequences of their choices. They need to know the reason for the consequence. "Running in the house can cause you to fall and get hurt."

7. When a young child breaks a rule the first time, calmly take her aside and remind her of the rule. Younger children may need a couple of reminders. When the rule is broken again, then gently, but firmly tell the child, "You ran in the house. The rule is 'No running'. Now you go sit down for five minutes."

8. Be certain to follow through. If you do not follow through, you are teaching a lesson that you probably don't want to teach. That lesson is simple. You are saying by your behavior (not following through) that when you say something, you don't mean it!

CONSEQUENCES

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES allow children to learn from the natural order of the world. For example, if the child doesn't eat, the child will get hungry. You allow the unpleasant but natural consequences to happen when a child does not act in a desirable way.

LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES are arranged by the caregiver. The consequences must logically follow the child's behavior. For example, throwing a block at the window means the child will not have blocks to play with. That's a logical consequence of throwing a block.

CONSEQUENCES TEACH RESPONSIBILITY. Using consequences can help a child develop a sense of responsibility. It leads to warmer relationships between caregivers and children and to fewer conflicts. The situation itself provides the lesson for the child.

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES CANNOT BE USED IN ALL SITUATIONS

Caregivers cannot use NATURAL CONSEQUENCES if the health or safety of the child is involved. If a young child runs into the street without looking, it is not possible to wait until the child is hit by a car, a natural consequence, to teach the child not to run into the street. Instead, the child should be taken into the house and told, "Since you ran into the street without looking, you cannot play outside now. You can come out when you decide to look before going into the street." (In this make-believe situation it goes without saying that the caregiver will need to be extra careful to watch this child when she is outside playing.) This is a LOGICAL CONSEQUENCE. Because running into the street can harm the child, the child cannot play outside until the

child learns to play safely in the yard. The child has a choice, to stay out of the street or to go inside. The child is given responsibility for behavior, and any consequences suffered (going inside) are the results of that behavior. Consequences cannot be used with very young children who do not understand about them. Remember, children's minds don't work like adults'. Children can't think like adults.

CONSEQUENCES ARE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The purpose of using consequences is to help the child learn to make decisions and to be responsible. Consequences are learning experiences, not punishment. They won't work if they are used like punishment. For example, if the caregiver yells angrily at the child, "Put up the toys, or you can't watch TV," she is not encouraging the child to make a responsible decision. If she says calmly and in a friendly voice, "Jesse, put your toys up, or you can't play with them for an hour," she allows Jesse to make a choice. The secret of using consequences effectively is to stay calm and detached. Be friendly, not vengeful and spiteful.

Caregivers cannot apply consequences if they are angry. They cannot conceal their anger from the child. Their voice will give them away. Try to view the situation objectively, as though the child were a total stranger's child and not one of your child care children. Administer the consequences in a firm and kindly manner. Remember that giving a child a choice and a chance to suffer the consequences is a learning process for the child.

Consequences work when the child is trying to get your attention by misbehaving and when children fight, dawdle, and fail to do their chores. They can be used to get children to pick up toys and to meals on time. Robert learns that if he doesn't wash his hands before meals, he won't be served any food; and if he fights with another child, he will have to sit down for five minutes.

CONSEQUENCES ARE HARD WORK

It is not easy to use consequences as a way to discipline children. It is hard work to think of consequences that really are logical. And it requires lots of patience. Sometimes it takes several weeks to get results.

Some caregivers are so used to telling children what to do, that it is very difficult to sit back and let the child suffer the consequences of the actions. The effort it takes to teach consequences is well worth it, because it means fewer battles between the caregiver and the child.

CONSEQUENCES VS. PUNISHMENT -The differences between consequences and punishment are:

CONSEQUENCES - calm tone of voice - friendly attitude - willing to accept the child's decision

PUNISHMENT - angry tone of voice - hostile attitude - unwilling to give a choice

FIRST TIME AND EVERY TIME – CONSISTENCY

One of the most difficult parts of enforcing rules is being consistent. When a child pounds on the table (you have a rule "no pounding on the table"), you may remind the child of the rule; and if it is broken again, you give the child the consequence. However, if you are busy and in another room when the child pounds on the table, you may be tempted to ignore the pounding and "hope it goes away." You hope the child will stop pounding. If the rule is not applied in the case of pounding on the table, the child who is pounding and all the others will quickly learn that rules can be ignored. The children will learn that you really didn't mean what you said about "pounding on the table." This lesson can then be applied to other behaviors.

Consistency goes beyond just dealing with behavior. It's vital that you are consistent with meal times, nap times, toy pick-up time, and the like. But when it comes to applying rules, it is not only vital; it's critical. You must follow through with the consequences each and every time. After a few times, the children will get the message that you mean what you say and the rules are to be kept.

TAKE A TIME-OUT

A "time-out" is an excellent discipline method to use when the kids are "bugging" you. It works like this: Sandra and Sarah are fighting over a game. You say, "Since you can't play together without fighting, I think you need a time-out. Sarah, you go to the bedroom, and Sandra, you go to the dining room and stay for five minutes. I will let you know when five minutes are up." (They can be sent to any room where they can be alone, but monitored and watched.) A time-out is not a punishment. It is just a boring few minutes when nothing happens.

Time-outs have many advantages. They can be used with children aged three to twelve. (They probably won't work with children younger than three, and they are not appropriate for teenagers.) Time-outs can be used with one child, two children, or three or as many children as you have places where they can be alone.

A time-out can be used when children are fighting or quarreling, or when their behavior is annoying you.

Before trying this new method, sit down and explain it to the children when both you and the children are in a happy frame of mind. It always helps if children know what to expect. For example, tell the children, "The next time you argue over the toys, we are going to try something new. It's called a time-out. When I say, 'Take a time-out,' it means you have to go to separate rooms and stay there five minutes. I will tell you when

five minutes are up."

KEEP YOUR COOL

Call time outs in a calm, cool way. It will not work if you make it a punishment or if you scream, "Roger, I've told you and Eddie a hundred times not to fight over your toys. You two will just have to take a time-out and see how you like that!" The objective of the time-out is to stop undesirable behavior. Roger and Eddie cannot fight when they are in separate rooms. The time-out gives them time to simmer down. It gives them time to think about their behavior and to realize that you will not allow it to continue.

The time-out is particularly helpful for fighting and quarreling situations. Sometimes children fight to get attention. When the caregiver screams and punishes, the children get negative attention. Even though they are punished, the attention they get gives them reason to repeat their fighting.

The time-out saves you from trying to decide who started the fight and who is to blame. Placing blame on one child only creates more jealousy. When fighting breaks out say, "Since you children cannot get along with each other, I think you need a time-out." If Bryan says, "But she started it," say, "I don't care who started it. You both need a time-out." When five minutes are up, say, "Five minutes are up." Don't say, "If you've learned your lesson, you can come out of your room now" or "You can come out and play now." Just let the children know that the five minutes are up.

Calling a time-out instead of punishing makes for less tension between you and the child. It causes less wear and tear on you. If the time-out does not work, you probably are not using it correctly. Some caregivers who have difficulty using this method are ones who have trouble saying "No" to the children. If the child refuses to go to the room, simply take the child by the hand and lead the way to the room. The child needs to learn that you

mean business; that once a time-out is called, the child is going to a room and stay there for five minutes. If the child won't stay in the room, the caregiver is probably not calling the time-out in a firm manner. (Being firm does not mean yelling.) Some caregivers have a time-out chair where a child sits. The child can't say or do anything while sitting in the chair. The caregiver must mean it. If the caregiver calls a time-out and then does not see that the child goes to a room, the technique will not work. The child soon learns that when the caregiver says, "Take a time-out," it will not be enforced.

The first time you try a time-out, the children will be surprised that you are not punishing them. After they are familiar with this discipline method, they will accept it and may even call time-out on themselves. This is a sign of self-discipline.

Try not to use a time-out for little things, or for behavior that is only slightly annoying or for normal accidents. In these cases attempt to ignore the behavior or distract the child.

GUIDE TO USING TIME-OUT

1. As with any rule, give the child a warning about what she is doing or not doing. Tell her if the behavior continues, "you will have to take a time-out."
2. If the behavior continues, calmly tell the child to go to the time-out place.
3. Don't pay any attention to comments, pleas, promises, or arguments. Don't get into a dialogue with the child, and don't argue or try to convince the child.
4. Tell the child how long the time-out will last. Some care givers use an egg timer or stove-type timer to keep track of the time. (Use one minute for each year of age. A four-year-old child has a

four-minute time-out.)

5. Tell the child the time-out will not begin until she is quiet and in the time-out place.

6. Once the time-out is over, tell the child to rejoin the group, and suggest an appropriate behavior.

REVERSE TIME-OUT

Reverse time-outs can be used when the child is really "bugging" you. Remove yourself from the situation. You may not be able to change the child's behavior, but you do not have to suffer through it. Instead of isolating the child, as in a time-out, it is the caregiver who is isolated. You might even simply turn your back on the problem, walk over to the window, and gaze out admiring the trees!

If the child is acting silly, arguing, or whining, momentarily leave the child, and go where the behavior can't get to you. For example, take a magazine; go to next room. You can be aware of what's happening, but are somewhat removed. Always stay within a distance that allows you to be certain the children are safe. Don't go back with the children until peace and calm are restored.

Some caregivers may not like the reverse time out method. It is inconvenient, and they interpret it as "giving in." But the children consider your presence rewarding. When you remove your presence, you are withholding a reward. Children soon learn that if they behave a certain way, you will ignore them.

We hope this information is helpful. If applied it can and will turn around your child's behaviors. Sometimes children and parents need a little more help in understanding behaviors and working to eliminate the negative behaviors and

illuminate the positive ones. If you would like to talk to one of our therapist please feel free to call and schedule an appointment. 386-423-9161.