



Discipline: Teaching School Age Children Social Skills

Discipline is teaching children to be safe, to keep others safe, and to get along with others. Discipline also means teaching children to do what's appropriate even when no adults are watching. It takes patience for parents to discipline children with love and concern.

Listed below are effective discipline techniques. They will help you and your children get along better and live with less stress.



Understanding misbehavior

Stop before you act. When your child does something you don't like, instead of yelling at or punishing him, ask yourself, "Why is my child behaving this way? What reasons may be behind his actions?"

- Does my child know the rule? For example, does she know not to eat when she's on the computer?
- Did she forget? Sometimes a child needs a gentle reminder. Say, "Remember, Allie, sit at the table when you eat."
- Is my child involved in an activity? Did he hear me talking to him? For example, is he reading a book, or playing a video game?
- Is my child old enough to follow the rule? For example, do I expect too much when I ask my child to watch her little sister?
- Is my child having a bad day? Does he feel sad or is he getting sick? Did he get bullied at school today? Did the teacher get angry with him?
- Is my child trying to get my attention? Does he want to know how I will react? Children may test to see if a parent will stick to a rule. For example, will complaining get a child a later bed time?
- Is my child copying behavior? Did she see me or another adult or child do the same thing?
- Is he showing his independence?
- Does she feel badly about herself?
- Is he protecting himself because someone is trying to hurt him either emotionally or physically?
- Has my child learned from her behavior? Do I need to do or say anything or has she learned from the outcome of the misbehavior or mistake?

Keeping these reasons in mind may help you meet your children's needs. Still, many parents try to plan ahead to prevent their children from misbehaving. Here are some suggestions for preventing certain behavior from happening in the first place.

Preventing Misbehavior

Provide love and affection. Increase the number of hugs you give your children. Tell them you love them. Spend time with your children so they know they are loved. Children who know they are loved don't have to misbehave to get their parents' attention. Their parents pay attention to them every day by talking and interacting with them. Children who receive love and affection from their parents are likely to identify with their parents and to obey them.

Encourage good behavior. Children need to feel important. Helping parents with family tasks makes children feel competent and valued. Thank your children for helping you and let them know *how* they have contributed to the family.

Arrange the environment. School age children are learning to do more and more for themselves. For example, they may like to get their own snacks after school. Set up your kitchen to avoid accidents and spills. Place plastic cups and plates in low cupboards. Buy small containers of juice that are easy for children to pour. Or pour some juice into a small pitcher. You can also prevent your kids from munching on junk food after school. Stock your kitchen with healthy snacks and don't buy cookies or soda.

Provide positive choices. Replace one activity or material with another. For example, you may tell your child, "You can't play at Kristen's house when no adults are home, but you may invite her to play here." Or, "You've been watching television for over an hour. You'll need to turn it off when this show is over. Then you could go for a ride on your bike or play a board game with me. Which would you like to do?"

Whenever possible, keep routines consistent. Children gain a sense of security and trust through daily routines. They can be upset by sudden changes. Warn children about changes that are coming. Let them know what to expect. If you cancel a trip to Aunt Ellen's house, explain why. Ask your children to suggest other days for the trip. Let them call their aunt to set up a new date.

Set realistic rules of behavior. This involves setting rules that match children's physical development (hand-eye coordination, strength), mental skills (attention span, memory), and social skills (ability to share, ability to understand the feelings of others).

The expectations and rules you set for younger children will differ from those you set for school age children. For example, young children haven't developed the strength, coordination, or skills needed to help with certain household chores. They don't have the physical skills to carry heavy dishes or to mow the lawn. They also have trouble remembering complicated directions. School age children are able to carry out many meaningful tasks. They can remember the steps in setting the dinner table or caring for the family dog. Helping out at home gives school age children a sense of belonging, mastery and confidence.

Examine the need for a rule. Rules exist for three reasons: to protect children, adults, and animals, to protect belongings and to help children learn to get along with others. Children have difficulty remembering a lot of rules. For each rule you set, ask yourself, "Why is this rule needed?" Have few rules but consistently enforce them.

Explain the reason for a rule. Children are more likely to follow a rule when they understand why the rule exists. Be sure to tell them the reason for a rule. Understanding the reason for a rule also helps children to remember to act correctly when an adult isn't present.

Involve school age children in setting limits. Children also are more likely to remember and follow rules if they help to set them and if you explain what will happen when they don't follow the rules. Ask them for suggestions. Encourage your children to come up with rules both you and they can live with. Write them down where all members of the family can see the rules. Review the rules every few weeks to make sure they are still needed. Rules will change as children grow older and situations change.



Consistently enforce rules. Be firm and consistent with the rules. When children know that you won't give in, they are less likely to test the rules. Be sure to change rules that are not working or your children have outgrown.

Model the behavior you like. Children are quick to imitate or act like adults. Show your children the behavior you like. Be polite to children; use please and thank you. Share with children. Show them how to express their feelings with words. Children who see parents express anger through aggression or harsh words will express their own anger in these ways. On the other hand, parents who use words and positive actions to calm down will see their children do the same.

Focus on do's, not don'ts. Children told only "don't" ("Don't throw your school bag on the floor.") have difficulty learning what they *should* be doing. One misbehavior may be replaced by another (leaving the bag on the kitchen table). Instead, tell children what they can do. "Hang up your bag on the hook in the hall closet, please." It may take children a long time to learn a rule. Be prepared to remind children many times and let them know how pleased you are when they learn a new rule.

Responding to misbehavior

Everyone makes mistakes. When children misbehave, they need guidance. Remember the reasons for misbehavior. Then, try some of these ideas.

Ignore misbehavior. Sometimes children will act out to get attention or to shock you. Ignoring behavior that is annoying but not harmful is a good plan.

Teach your children how to handle their anger. As children move into the school age years, they become more and more interested in spending time with other children. They are learning how to cooperate and interact with others. But, during the first half of this stage (between about 5 and 8 years of age) children still have difficulty understanding another person's point of view. Working out conflicts can be a challenge. Encourage them to use words to work out problems; to express feelings and think of solutions. They will need your help and reminding. Help children think of ways to let off steam when they're angry. They may go for a bike ride, walk away, go to a quiet place or talk to you.

Respond to the misbehavior, not the child.

Try to focus on the behavior, not the child. Say, "I'm angry the food is all over the floor. What can we do about this problem?" rather than, "You're so clumsy! When will you learn to be more careful!"

Redirect children. When children are misbehaving, try directing them to a similar but acceptable behavior. "You can't buy that video game. It's too violent. But you can get another one that has a lot of action, but no violence. Do you want to pick one out and show me, or should we ask the sales clerk to help us find one?"

Use a discipline technique that relates to the misbehavior.

Sometimes consequences occur naturally, and children learn from them without the parent's involvement. For example, a child who doesn't do his homework may feel embarrassed when called on by the teacher in class. Other times, adults can use logical consequences. The same child who did not do his homework may be asked to stay in from recess or miss an after school activity to make up the assignment.

Hitting Children

Most parents don't like to hit, spank, slap, punch, kick, or scream or yell at their children. They often feel like failures when they do so. But, sometimes parents use physical and/or emotional punishment to cope with their own anger and frustrations. Yelling at or spanking a child may stop a behavior for the moment, but it won't stop the child from doing the same thing later on. He or she hasn't been taught what to do instead.

When children are hit, they are overwhelmed by feelings of pain, anger, humiliation, and resentment. Younger school age children may not remember why they're being punished.

Physical punishment may lead to increased aggressive behavior. Adults who received physical punishment as children show more problems than adults who weren't hit. These problems include aggression, depression and anxiety. Most parents don't want their children to learn the lessons of hitting. Hitting tells children that people who love you are likely to hurt you. It also teaches that it's OK to hit people smaller than you. Most parents who spank their children don't go to the extreme of physically abusing them. However, research shows that most physical abuse of children begins as ordinary physical punishment. Parents lose control and children are badly hurt.

Remember that discipline is about teaching. Hitting and other physical and emotional punishment does not teach children what they can do. When you feel angry and frustrated with your child's behavior, take some time to calm down.

- Take deep breaths.
- Go to a private place, like your bedroom, for a few minutes.
- Splash water on your face.
- If there's another adult at home, go outside for a few minutes or take a quick walk.
- Call the New Hampshire Parent Line at 1-800-640-6486, press "0" for the operator and ask to talk to a parent link counselor. Someone is there to listen and to give you ideas for making parenting easier.

When you're calm, think about:

- Why your child is misbehaving
- How you can prevent this from happening again, and
- How you can respond to teach your child a positive lesson.

Sources:

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