
Discipline and children

Summary

- Discipline is not another word for punishment.
 - Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control.
 - Pace the discipline of your child with your child's capacity to understand.
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The Latin origin of the word discipline is 'to teach'. Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control. With appropriate and consistent discipline, your child will learn about consequences and taking responsibility for their own actions. The ultimate aim is to encourage the child to learn to manage both their feelings and behaviour. This is called self-monitoring.

At its best, discipline rewards the child for appropriate behaviour and discourages inappropriate behaviour, using fair and positive means. Some parents think that discipline means physical punishment, such as hitting and smacking, or verbal abuse such as yelling or threatening the child. This is not discipline.

The consequences of physical punishment

Children learn by example. A number of studies show that the most influential role models in a child's life are their parents. It is important that parents act as a model for how they want their children to behave.

Using physical punishment or inflicting pain on a child to stop them from misbehaving only teaches them that it is OK to solve problems with violence. Children learn how this is done from watching their parents use physical violence against them.

Other problems caused by physical punishment:

- Damage to the very precious parent-child relationship
- Harm to the child's dignity, self-respect, self-esteem and sense of a positive identity
- The possibility of physical and psychological injury
- Lost opportunity to use the child's misbehaviour to teach them responsibility and self-control
- The destruction of the child's sense of fairness and justice
- Long-term effects – the child may become withdrawn, fearful or use bullying behaviour
- The child may try to avoid physical punishment by telling lies.

Reasons for misbehaviour

Children misbehave for many reasons:

- They are too young to know that their actions are unacceptable.
- They are frustrated, angry or upset and have no other reasonable way to express their feelings.
- They are stressed by major changes such as family breakup, a new sibling or starting school.
- They are not getting your attention when they do behave appropriately.
- They feel you have been unfair and want to punish you.
- They need a greater degree of independence and feel constricted.

Your child's ability to understand

Disciplining a child means teaching your child what is acceptable behaviour. A child's intellectual ability develops over time. It is important to match the discipline of your child with your child's capacity to understand. A very young child, such as a baby, has no comprehension of right and wrong.

Children under three do not misbehave – they have needs that they want met, such as hunger and thirst. They cannot yet respond to consequences by changing behaviour and so need to be told the same message over and over again, for example, 'put your hat on in the sun'. When they continue to go out in the sun without their hats, they are not disobedient – they just cannot remember.

Try to explain things to your child in a way that matches their development level and remember to also lower yourself to their physical level. Children act out their feelings through their behaviour, so it is important to understand the feelings behind the behaviour. If you know the reasons for your child's misbehaviour or feelings, you can help solve the underlying problems.

Routines help a child to learn

Children learn how to behave by copying the adults around them. They thrive when they know what is expected of them and their day has a similar pattern to it. Children feel safe when they know the order of events and can predict what will happen next. This is the same with reactions to children's behaviour. The child needs to know what the adults' reaction will be and that it will be fair and consistent.

Suggestions include:

- Tell or show children the behaviour you **do** want rather than punishing them for behaviour you don't want.
- Clearly explain the preferred behaviour and make sure your child understands what you expect of them.
- If you are amused by your child's naughty behaviour, try not to show it on your face or else your child might think you approve.
- Children thrive under consistent routines but they can handle the occasional change in routine, for example, eating meals at the table most of the time with the occasional 'treat' of eating in front of the TV.
- Make sure you're not expecting too much from a young child. For example, it is normal for young toddlers to make a mess while they are eating, because motor control and table manners take time to master. Young children are also unable to sit at the table for long periods of time and often need to eat much earlier than the family is used to having their evening meal.
- If you must make threats, make sure they are reasonable and carry them out. Generally threats show our frustration as parents or carers and are not a positive way to encourage the behaviour we want in children.
- Ask your child to be involved in making some of the rules for the family.

Explaining consequences

Good discipline helps a child to learn that there are consequences for their actions. Ideally, the consequence should immediately follow the action and should be relevant to the behaviour. Teaching your child about consequences may include asking them to:

- Clean up a mess they have made
- Tidy up their toys when they can't find the one they are looking for
- Spend time alone (taking 'time out') when their behaviour indicates they can no longer play well with others. This is a time for the child to regain their composure and return to the group with their dignity intact
- Play by themselves when they have been aggressive.

Time out for children

For children, spending time alone (taking 'time out') before their behaviour embarrasses themselves or angers their parents can be a valuable opportunity for self-reflection. This is appropriate for older children, as long as the child isn't made to feel hurt, humiliated or embarrassed. As children get older, under the guidance of helpful discipline, the child will learn to take themselves to their room when they are losing control.

Time out should not be misused with very young children or children who may see it as punishment and feel humiliated or confused by being forced to sit on a 'naughty chair' and 'think about what they have done'.

Time out for parents

If you find yourself getting angry and frustrated with your child's behaviour, you may need to take time out to deal with your own feelings. It may be best to temporarily remove yourself from a situation you are finding stressful.

This may mean making sure your child is safe and leaving the room for a few minutes. Another option is calling a friend or relative to give you a break.

Reinforcing good behaviour

A child naturally wants the love and approval of their parents, so one of the easiest ways to encourage good behaviour is for children to know what behaviour is expected of them and to know they will be recognised and encouraged for it.

Where to get help

- Your local maternal and child health nurse
- Maternal and Child Health Line Tel. 132 229 (24 hours)
- **National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN)**
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89

Things to remember

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