

DISCIPLINE





St. Louis Children's Hospital believes the best care comes from more than just knowing how to deliver world-class medical treatment. It also comes from knowing why children misbehave and what parents can do to foster good behavior.

DISCIPLINE

Many people think that punishment and discipline are one in the same; however, they are very different approaches to misbehavior. Punishment is a negative or unpleasant consequence that occurs as a result of a child's misbehavior. Discipline is a constant process of teaching appropriate behavior based on limits, praise and a positive relationship between the child and parent, as well as teaching appropriate ways to deal with one's feelings. When used effectively, discipline fosters a positive sense of one's self, encourages appropriate behavior and creates trust between the child and parent.

It's important for parents to provide a respectful, loving and understanding environment for children to learn through discipline how to develop self-discipline. The use of discipline will help reduce anger and emotional outbursts.

Children should learn how to make good choices and learn the consequences of making poor choices. Misbehavior should be discouraged firmly, fairly and consistently and good behavior should be rewarded with love and praise.

The information provided in this booklet will help parents understand, several different discipline techniques that parents can use and ways to enhance positive parent-child relationships. There is also a list of valuable resources to help parents work through this sometimes difficult process.

PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Like any relationship, each person has rights and responsibilities. As a parent, you have the following responsibilities (you may want to think of these as ground rules):

- Give love, unconditionally.
- Enjoy the child's unique abilities.
- Understand that discipline is teaching, not punishment.
- Show by example that communication should be both respectful and positive.
- Know that setting limits for children helps them learn to be safe and responsible.
- Understand that children thrive on routine.
- Accept your children for who they are, not who you want them to be.
- Help your children develop good decision-making skills.
- Know effective parenting is an acquired skill; some "fine tuning" may be necessary.
- Understand that what worked yesterday may not work today; try to be flexible.
- Realize that learning about age-appropriate growth and development may give you insight into your child.

Understanding what makes children unique is essential to knowing what discipline techniques will work best with your family.



BUILDING POSITIVE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Successful parent-child relationships are based on love, trust and mutual respect.

Here are some tips to help you build a healthy relationship with your child:

- Have agreement between parents on basic values and expectations of children.
- Clearly communicate expectations of behavior.
- Spend time together as a family.
- Use positive communication styles.
- Give unconditional love.
- Offer developmentally-appropriate choices.
- Use a consistent, calm approach when dealing with kids.
- Know that hugs, smiles and eye contact go a long way in communication.
- Get your child's full attention before giving directions.
- Problem-solve together. Saying, "What do you think?" sends a powerful message.

LIMITS AND RULES

Children need and want limitations and rules. Giving a child clear, understandable, appropriate rules helps the child know what behavior is expected of him. Both parents need to agree on appropriate expectations and consequences so that they provide a "united front" when enforcing rules and consequences. When parents consistently enforce rules and consequences, children will not be confused about what the rules are and will not be able to divide the parents on disciplining issues.

A rule should include:

- statements that are clear, understandable and age-appropriate, letting the child know exactly what is expected of him.
- appropriate behavior role-modeled by you.
- calm discussions with short and simple explanations.

- Remember no one is perfect – parent nor child.
- Don't forget that every day is a new day and yesterday is over.
- KEEP YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR!



LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Consequences should be appropriate for the rule that has been broken. For example, if a child leaves her bike outside, she loses the privilege of riding her bike for a week. The consequence should be given immediately and the parent should be consistent and firm. Do not bargain or argue and always follow through with the consequences. Logical consequences can be time outs or loss of privileges.

Remember to:

- disengage from a power struggle by telling the child that their behavior is unacceptable. Setting a logical consequence for the behavior, and removing yourself from the power struggle will help you maintain control of the situation.
- avoid negative words. For example, you might say, "Put the blocks in the bin," instead of "Don't throw the blocks."
- use praise to encourage good behavior.



WHY DO CHILDREN MISBEHAVE AND WHAT CAN A PARENT DO ABOUT IT?

Children fail to follow rules and commands provided to them for a wide variety of reasons, most of which are very normal and understandable. The reasons range from environmental factors that promote disobedience to factors specific to the child. In any case, parents can take action in order to either prevent misbehavior or at least reduce how often children misbehave. The following are examples of typical reasons why children misbehave and what a parent can do about it:

- **Biological reasons:** Children are most likely to misbehave and show poor self-control when they are tired, hungry or sick, much like many adults. It is important to keep these factors in mind as many challenging behaviors occur just before bed or just after waking. Maintaining daily schedules and routines can often avoid some of the most challenging and frustrating battles with children.
- **Developmental issues:** The child does not understand the request being placed on them or is too immature to effectively follow through with the request. Examples of disobedience as a result of developmental issues can be found when asking a 3-year-old to clean up a cluttered room without guidance, or expecting that a 9-year-old will solve complicated

algebra problems. Parents are encouraged to make sure the child clearly understands what is expected, and that the child has the ability to follow the request when motivated to do so.

- **Misbehaving can be fun/stimulating:** Many “forbidden” behaviors are just simply fun, such as jumping on the bed. At other times, it may be doing something that the child feels a strong passion for, and has not yet developed the appropriate self-control to be able to avoid the temptation, such as eating one more piece of candy after being told not to do so. In order to facilitate developing self-control, parents are encouraged to provide adequate supervision, and when a child misbehaves, provide a swift and specific consequence for the misbehavior. For example, the child knows that, although jumping on the bed is fun, it is unsafe and will result in an immediate time out when such misbehavior is observed.
- **Unclear requests:** A common reason that children fail to comply with parents’ requests is due to the parent not making their expectations clear. For example, a parent may state to the child, “We need to put your stuff away.” This request implies that the child should stop what he is doing immediately and begin to pick up all items that are out of place. The child often “hears” that the parent will help them pick up a few things sometime today. Parents are encouraged to make their expectations clear and explicit, such as, “Please clean up the legos and cars in the family room right now.” In this example, there is no doubt that the parent expects the child to take action immediately and put away specific items.
- **Ineffective requests:** Closely related to unclear requests are requests in which parents fail to provide clear expectations and consequences for obedience or disobedience. Often, parents are asking children to do things they are not interested in doing. For example, “Turn off the TV,” “Come in for dinner,” or “Get dressed” are all common requests which typically are given when a child is interested in doing something else. If there is a competing and more attractive activity, the child is much more likely to not follow the request. Without an understanding of the positive and negative consequences, children are less likely to make an effective decision, and parents are more likely to nag and be ineffective. If a child is noncompliant after the initial request is given, parents are encouraged to make consequences clear for obedient or non-obedient

behavior. For example, “If you get dressed now, you can watch cartoons” or “If you do not come to dinner now, I will put the toy you’re playing with in my closet for the next week.”

- **Child testing limits/control issues:** Children naturally test limits as they mature and become more independent. This is a healthy behavior that promotes autonomy and behaviors expected in healthy adults. However, testing limits can be frustrating for parents. For example, when you make it clear that your 10-year-old is to stay in the house while you run an errand and you find her talking to a friend on the sidewalk upon your return, she is testing the limit. It is an infraction of a rule or expectation that challenges you to respond. In order to manage the testing of limits, parents are encouraged to deliver clear and effective requests (outlined on page 6) so that the child understands the consequences associated with their obedience or disobedience. Discussion of changes to limits, such as a change in bedtime, should be done at a time that the parent and child are calm and not in conflict.
- **Negative attention-seeking behavior:** Children thrive on attention, with some children needing more than others. Children prefer positive attention, but negative attention is better than no attention. Some children explicitly misbehave or challenge parents in order to engage their attention. For them, even being yelled at is better than being bored or feeling lonely. Children are more likely to engage in negative attention-seeking behavior when they are feeling disconnected from parents or when there is stress facing the child or family. Parents are encouraged to first determine if a child or family is experiencing a more stressful time than usual, and if so, make an extra effort to spend positive time with the child and try to discuss the stressors. If the child seems to be engaging in negative attention-seeking behavior for no apparent reason, parents are encouraged to completely ignore the negative behavior, while providing considerable praise and attention to the child for more appropriate behavior. These actions let the child know how he can get “what he wants” from the parent.
- **Behavioral disorder:** For some children, their misbehavior is a reflection of a more serious problem. It is important for parents to note that all children misbehave, and only a small portion have a behavioral disorder. Behavioral disorders may be the result of a child’s challenging temperament, stressors impacting the child and family, or even a medical condition. In this situation, the child is consistently misbehaving in a way



What do you like most about your relationship with your child?

that is outside of typical behavior for her age. The problematic behavior is often not a product of a well thought out or planned act, but instead, more reactive to the environment and impulsive. To determine if a child has a behavioral disorder, an in-depth evaluation of the behaviors of concern is typically conducted by either the child's pediatrician or a behavioral health specialist.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE HAVING DIFFICULTIES IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD

If you are having difficulty with your child consistently being disobedient, or you are not enjoying your relationship with your child, it is important to get professional help as early as possible. Initially, parents are encouraged to talk with the child's pediatrician.

Your pediatrician can provide guidance on how to address your child's problematic behavior. Your pediatrician may provide a referral to a behavioral health professional, such as a psychologist or therapist, to work on your concerns. Ultimately, professional help should be focused towards improving the parent-child relationship. A healthy parent-child relationship is critical to improving behavioral problems and for promoting the well-being of your child.

YOU ARE A ROLE-MODEL

It is important to remember that children learn by observing the world around them. As parents and caregivers you should be mindful of your actions when around children and always make an effort to set a good example. Modeling appropriate behavior is part of the discipline process and is just as important as the consequences you choose to use.

There are many reasons why children misbehave and there are many discipline strategies that parents can use. Strategies such as spanking and shouting may appear to be effective in the short term but will eventually give children the message that hitting and screaming are appropriate problem-solving techniques. Instead, use strategies that redirect the child's attention, use natural and logical consequences and talk with the child about the actions and the effects they have on others. Help your child learn to replace negative behaviors with positive behaviors.

Whatever the reason for the inappropriate behavior or the discipline strategy you choose to use, it is important to remember that discipline is a process of teaching, outlining and modeling appropriate behavior. Learning to discipline by using positive strategies takes time and patience. Above all, be prepared to make mistakes...everyone does. Also, remember that if your child's behavior becomes too difficult to handle on your own, help is available.



SUGGESTED READING

General parenting

- Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*
- Harvey Karp, MD, *The Happiest Toddler on the Block*
- Kevin Leman, *Making Children Mind Without Losing Yours*
- Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott and H. Stephen Glenn, *Positive Discipline A-Z*
- Jay A. Parry and Alvin H. Price, *Discipline: One Hundred One Alternatives to Nagging, Yelling and Spanking*
- Thomas W. Phelan, Ph.D., *1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12*

Parenting the strong-willed child

- Russell A. Barkley and Christine M. Benton, *Your Defiant Child: Eight Steps to Better Behavior*
- James C. Dobson, *The Strong-Willed Child: Birth Through Adolescence*

Web sites

- StLouisChildrens.org
- aamft.org/families/index_nm.asp
- aap.org
- childparenting.about.com
- parentsoup.com

This information was provided by the Department of Psychology, the Answer Line and the Child Development Center at St. Louis Children's Hospital.

WE ARE READY FOR YOUR CALL

St. Louis Children's Hospital pursues knowing in everything we do.
If you're interested in learning more about discipline issues,
or for assistance in choosing a pediatrician, our pediatric nurses can help.

Call the St. Louis Children's Hospital Answer Line at
314.454.KIDS (5437) or 800.678.KIDS (5437).

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