

Positive Parenting

How To Encourage Good Behavior

By Margie Markarian

Whether it's sneaking a snack before dinner, refusing to finish up a video game, or whining all the way to the mall, misbehaving is an inevitable part of childhood. It's no secret that effective parenting involves knowing how to respond when kids act up and steering clear of meltdown situations. It also means setting limits so kids know when they are crossing the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

"The gentlest way to set limits is to establish routines and rules so that children know what's expected of them," says Pamela C. High, M.D., FAAP, and director of developmental-behavioral pediatrics at Hasbro Children's/Rhode Island Hospital in Providence. "When children are young, the easiest kinds of limits to set are the ones about safety, like 'Don't touch the stove' and 'Hold my hand when you cross the street.'"

Good Rules, Good Rewards

As kids get older and the situations they face become more varied, parents tend to have more ambivalence about rules, says Dr. High, who is also a professor of clinical pediatrics at Brown University's Medical School. Nonetheless, rules about no TV until homework is done and being in pajamas and ready for bed by 8:15 on school nights has a way of warding off conflict.

"Children want to know the boundaries and what the rules are," says Dennis Vickers, M.D., FAAP, chairman of pediatrics at Sinai Children's Hospital in Chicago. "Discipline is really more about guiding children toward positive behavior than it is about punishment."

Both pediatricians recommend adopting a parenting style that encourages and recognizes good behavior with words, smiles, and hugs. They also urge parents to get in the habit of catching their children doing things right.

"Noticing and complimenting kids for hanging up their jackets, setting the table, and keeping a baby brother amused while you cook supper reinforces the types of positive behavior you want to see again and again," says Dr. High.

Quality Time

In spite of busy lifestyles, it's also important to spend quality parent-child time together each day. "Even if it's only five, 10, or 15 minutes, children are looking for attention and need some special time," says Dr. Vickers. Even when the number of spare minutes in your day is scarce, remember that quality time "... goes a long way in keeping children from using negative behavior to get your attention."

Family meals and bedtime stories are ideal opportunities for parents and children to catch up and connect in positive ways. "But doing different things on different days works, too," acknowledges Dr. High. The point is to be focused on your child, which can happen whether the two of you are chatting during a walk to the store, making dinner together, playing a board game, or high-fiving each other after a soccer match.

Measuring Discipline

For those unavoidable times when kids need discipline, consider the following approaches to doling out punishment:

- **Establish logical consequences.** To the degree possible, the consequence of any misdeed should relate to the offense in a sensible, easy-to-understand way. For example, if your kids are fighting over a toy after you've given them the chance to work things out, simply take the toy away for 24 hours and then let them try again. Similarly, if your son "forgets" to wear a helmet when he's riding his skateboard, help him to "remember" by not letting him ride the skateboard for at least the rest of the day.
- **Take away privileges.** Sometimes it's not possible to come up with an appropriate consequence. That's when withholding privileges becomes an effective strategy. Just be sure to take away a privilege your child deems valuable and isn't a basic need. Children above the age of 4 or 5 understand it when you tell them: "You can't have a friend over this weekend because you didn't do your household chores" or "You won't be able to watch your favorite TV show tonight because you borrowed your sister's paint set without asking and then messed up all the colors." But keep in mind that younger children don't understand



the long-term consequences of their actions as well.

- **Call for a timeout.** Timeout remains a tried-and-true discipline tool for escalating behavior problems because it removes attention from the negative behavior. They are especially helpful in calming tantrums and defusing aggressive behaviors (biting, hitting, throwing), as well as for responding to willful disobedience, back-talk, interrupting, and sometimes whining. Experts agree that timeouts should last one minute for each year of life up to age 11 or 12. Timeouts should take place in a safe, boring home location that is free from entertaining distractions and does not frighten your child in any way. When the timeout is over and you and your child have both calmed down, explain why the behavior was unacceptable and move on. Remember that your ultimate goal isn't to separate your child, but to give him a little time to calm down and then re-engage in what's going on around him.

Ultimately, the best way to encourage good behavior is to lay the groundwork early by being a good role model and demonstrating a consistent, loving approach to discipline. It's also important to have patience and maintain a flexible attitude, because there are always going to be times when kids are being annoying but not really doing any harm. And, as Dr. Vickers points out, "It's okay to let little things stay little things." ●

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Discipline No-Nos for Parents

- **No hitting or spanking.** Physical force hurts and teaches kids that violence is an acceptable way to show anger and solve problems. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly opposes striking a child.
- **No labels.** A child may exhibit "bad behavior," but a child should not be called a "bad boy" or a "bad girl."
- **No unreasonable expectations.** Expect your child to test limits, and recognize that it is your job as a parent to consistently (and as calmly as possible) teach consequences. Avoid situations that invite meltdowns and keep your child's age, temperament, and maturity level in mind as you go through the course of the day. If, for example, you know your child is tired and hungry, then don't expect perfect behavior at the supermarket.
- **No idle threats.** Don't render yourself ineffective by saying things like, "I won't buy you a toy if you don't stop whining," only to give in and buy the toy later. Kids quickly learn that you're not true to your word, and will take advantage by not complying with your requests.
- **Avoid inconsistencies.** You may feel one way, your spouse might feel another way, but back each other up in your child's presence. Then, discuss your different approaches privately. "When you don't present a united front, children figure it out very quickly and capitalize on it," says Pamela C. High, M.D., FAAP, and director of developmental-behavioral pediatrics at Hasbro Children's/Rhode Island Hospital in Providence.