

## ***Discipline: When You Don't Know What to Do***

"Without discipline, there's no life at all."—Katharine Hepburn, American actress

You want your child to act one way. Your child acts the opposite way. You say something, and your child doesn't listen. You try a different approach, and that doesn't work either. Try these ideas when you're stumped about how to discipline your child in ways that work.

### ***Try it...***

#### ***For all parents***

- Approach discipline as a way of teaching your child, rather than punishing your child. Your kids will be more open to learning and changing their ways if they don't feel threatened, shamed, or punished.
- Talk with other parents about your experience. Some ages are more difficult to discipline (such as toddlers, preschoolers, and certain ages of teenagers). If you're stumped with disciplining your oldest child, seek out advice from parents with older kids. They often have perspectives and suggestions that are helpful.
- Team up with neighbors, teachers, extended family members, and friends to give kids consistent messages about boundaries and also in reinforcing those boundaries. You'll have a much easier time convincing your child to act in a certain way if most people are backing you up and giving the same message.
- Try to keep money out of your discipline methods. For example, don't give kids money to entice them to do something, and don't cut their allowance for misbehavior. If your child hits his brother, discipline him by having him do his brother's chore for the day (or the week).
- In today's society, many parents have a hard time telling their kids no. Yet, kids of all ages need to know what to expect, how to act, and how not to act. (And their development will be a smoother process if they have a good balance of support and boundaries from their parents.) For more ideas, read the book [\*No: Why Kids—Of All Ages—Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It\*](#) by David Walsh, Ph.D..
- It is absolutely critical that you follow through with the consequences that you've laid out for your child. Giving in or letting kids talk you out of a consequence only creates problems later on for two reasons. First, your child won't think boundaries are important later on. Second, this undermines your role and credibility as a parent. This isn't to say there isn't wiggle room. No rule is ironclad; however, make sure you change consequences only under considerable circumstances.

#### ***For parents with children ages birth to 5***

- Child development experts say the most effective discipline technique for infants is distraction. Children under the age of 12 months of age do not have the cognitive

development to choose “wrong” behavior. Thus, scolding, yelling, and punishing infants at this age will do nothing but frustrate you *and* your child. Instead, try to distract your child from whatever he or she is doing. Remove the item with which your child is playing or pick up your child and move her to a different spot. Do anything to get your child interested in something else.

- Young children need consistency in their lives in order to develop well, such as toilet training and eating healthy foods. Create predictable, consistent schedules. When your child resists, get creative—for example, become a taxi and give your child a ride on your back to the bathtub.
- To raise young children well, respond immediately to infants’ cries. Until children reach the age of 6 to 10 months, they are not able to make associations between their behaviors and the actions of others. That’s why it’s important to establish a sense of trust in your infant by responding sensitively to your child’s changing needs. Kids thrive best when they have a balance of support and consistent, predictable boundaries.
- Disciplining 2- to 5-year-olds is much more than trying to coerce or bribe them to do the right thing. It’s about teaching kids which behaviors are right and wrong—and *why* those behaviors are that way. This requires negotiating with children, pointing out why a behavior is wrong, alerting your child to the consequences of her behavior, and talking specifically about what’s right and wrong so that kids begin to internalize these messages. Ideally you want kids to *internalize* what’s right and wrong rather than just *comply* with authority.

### ***For parents with children ages 6 - 9***

- Kids at this age become much more interested in electronics, such as video games, computer games, and TV shows. Place boundaries around how much time they spend on these “screen” activities, and make sure they’re also getting physical activity that they enjoy.
- Children at this age begin to notice the difference between what you say and what you do (if there’s any inconsistency). Instead of becoming defensive, admit when you’ve made a mistake. Set a good example, and then talk about how both kids and adults need to follow boundaries.
- If you find yourself stuck with how to deal with a specific behavior, consult a school counselor or school social worker. (They provide this service for free, and they often have lots of good tips.) Plus, they know that kids are more likely to do well in school if they have good behavior at home and at school. If you fear that this will create a “school record” on your child’s behavior, seek out help from a parent educator through your community education program.

### ***For parents with children ages 10 - 15***

- Don’t be surprised if your house becomes a high-tension zone. Kids at this age often question and resist most things you suggest. This is important for their development, but don’t let them by with everything. Choose which boundaries are most important, and be consistent with those. For example, you might need to let your child wear green hair as long as your child does well in school and doesn’t get into trouble.
- Find other caring, trusted adults for your child to connect to and spend time with. Whenever you’re stumped about what they’re doing, call this person and explain how you’re at your wit’s end. Ask if he can take your child out for ice cream or a soda and spend some time together. Afterward, ask this adult for tips on how to

connect with your child.

- Know when to ground your child—and when not to. For more ideas, check out the online article [Grounded! How to Make Discipline Work](#).

### ***For parents with children ages 16 - 18***

- Continue to talk with your teenager about what you expect in terms of behavior, but have more conversations about values. Explain *why* you want your kids to act a certain way. For example, “I know you’re dating, but I think it’s better not to have sexual intercourse as a teenager. I waited until I was married, and I’m glad I waited. You develop deep bonds with someone you’ve had sex with, and I believe that’s important to have with one lifelong partner.” See what your teenager has to say. Encourage your teenager to express his or her values and then go from there.
- Use current and school events to bring up tough topics, such as drinking and driving, weapon use, pregnancy, drug use, and so on. You can always find an example on the news (and sometimes in your school or community) of people behaving badly. Sometimes it’s easier to talk about tough topics and your views on behavior when it’s someone you don’t know.
- As your teenager gets older, talk about how she needs to be the “captain of herself.” That means that when your child moves out or goes to college, you won’t be there to remind her about certain things. During the older teenage years, gradually back off (and be clear to your teen about consequences) so that by the time your teen is a senior, she is more in charge of her life while also respecting others in your household. You don’t want your teen to feel too constrained before moving out, because too many of these kids often “go wild” without parents around.
- Expect older teenagers to make mistakes. This is part of growing up. Be firm, but also be empathetic. Show them the way to make things right.
- Don’t get overly angry with your teenager for misbehavior (provided that you have set appropriate expectations for behavior). That way when your teenager misbehaves, all you have to say is, “You knew what the rules were and what the consequences would be.” Convey that the consequences are a result of *your teen’s behavior*. This helps teenagers understand that they are ultimately accountable for their actions.