

Effective Discipline

The World Is Different, but Molding Children's Behavior Is Still a Struggle

Whether you believe the recent changes in our culture are good or bad, our children certainly grow up in a very different environment than we did.

They are introduced to the real world through mass communication at an early age. They learn faster with educational TV shows, computers, media and modern teaching methods.

Although children today are more worldly, they are still children. Parents still have the age-old problem of getting them to behave in ways that are socially acceptable as well as consistent with their own values.

New Attitudes about Discipline Are Based on Relationships

For a long time discipline was thought of as punishment--a way to eliminate unwanted behavior. Today, most professionals agree that discipline should reinforce positive, desirable behavior.

The basis for the new attitude is a better understanding of the stages of child development. For example, while toddlers may understand the word "no," they may be unable to inhibit their behavior without an adult reminder present--that's a normal part of toddlerhood.

Equally important to developing effective discipline strategies is knowing that children want to please their parents. Nothing makes them happier than parental acknowledgment and love. Each time you compliment your child, you help to build a strong positive relationship.

On the other hand, shouting, threatening, spanking and punishment may instill fear and dislike and undermine the strong positive relationship. Because children seek approval from those they care about, the foundation you want to build is of love and caring, not fear and dislike.

Creative Strategies to Help Children Meet Expectations

If you understand the stage of development your child is in, your expectations will be consistent with his or her capabilities. Parental techniques work at particular stages. For example:

With toddlers:

- Use environmental control. Childproof your house and yard so you don't have to constantly say "no."
- Try distraction. A toddler's attention span is very short. Instead of admonishing, replace the offending stimulus with something more appropriate.
- Be very specific. If your child is nearing a hot stove, stop him but make sure you say "hot" so he knows why.
- Catch your child being good and praise him often. Say, "You hung up your coat. What a good boy!"



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With Young Children:

- Don't argue. Let them experience the natural consequences of their behavior. If your daughter won't put her shoes on, you can say, "It is too cold to go outside without shoes. If you don't put on your shoes, we can't go outside."
- Set reasonable limits or boundaries and consistently stick to them gently but firmly. If you don't want your child to hit another child, an adult, or a pet, you must make it clear and try not to waver. By doing so you will help your child develop inner control. While children may not be old enough to control their feelings, they can begin to control their actions. If your child is hitting, you might try to hold his or her hands and say, "I know you are mad, but it is not okay to hit."
- Reinforce each small step toward the ultimate goal; don't wait until your child achieves the objective. For example, if you want your child to dress himself, praise him for getting his shirt on, even if he doesn't make it to his socks and sneakers.

With early and late adolescents:

- Do not openly criticize unpleasant habits--nagging limits your effectiveness. Be firm but choose your battles. Some bad habits will go away on their own.
- Do not lecture. Lecturing usually makes a child feel ashamed, inadequate and resentful. It is more effective to be alert for praiseworthy behavior.
- Give your child a voice in decisions that affect him or her. If the decision seems wrong to you, try to focus on the feelings behind it.

If You Need to Discipline

Children have to learn that all behavior has consequences. Failure to let children experience the consequences of their actions may indeed spoil a child, but harsh or rigid discipline is not required.

Many professionals advise using a technique called "time-out," which temporarily removes the child from social interaction he or she enjoys. When the normal consequences of their actions aren't enough to motivate children, it may be useful to create an artificial consequence such as time-out.

For example, if your child is interrupting adults in conversation by speaking loudly and pulling on the adult, you may feel like stopping your conversation and shouting at your child. If your child was trying to get your attention, his behavior worked, even though the attention was negative.

In calling a time-out you might say, "I see you want to be included in our conversation, but you are not being polite. So now you will have to sit in the other room for a few minutes until you are ready to be polite, and then people will want to talk with you." A good rule of thumb for time-out length is one minute per year of age.

Professionals have found that time-out is more effective when the child is removed from social interaction rather than from physical things. For example, if two children are fighting over a doll, it would be better to use time-out than to take the doll away from them as punishment.

Rethink the Ideas We Picked Up from Our Parents

A common misperception is that you must act immediately to correct unacceptable behavior. While this is usually true when the offense is serious or when parents feel particularly upset or angry, it makes sense to get a little distance from the situation so you can objectively judge the severity of your child's action.

It is okay for your child to see you debating over disciplinary options. Parents don't have to agree with each other or use the same approaches to discipline. Seeing their parents' independent attitudes can teach children that their own attitude is valid, even if it isn't the same as another's.

If Your Approach to Discipline Isn't Working

You may need help in your approach to discipline if:

- You are often at the end of your rope
- You find yourself shouting all the time
- You have a great deal of stress
- You are at the point of diminishing returns; the more you argue, the less satisfaction you get
- You can't see any other options

If you aren't getting through to your children for some reason, you may be able to benefit from professional help. Experts in child development can teach you new techniques.

If you feel overwhelmed, you can call Bradley Hospital anytime: 401-432-1000.