

## DISCIPLINE AND BEHAVIOR

A critical aspect of parenting revolves around molding behaviors and providing discipline. All children, regardless of age, learn to behave in ways that are shaped by their experiences. It is essential for children to test limits and to see just how far they can push before you will respond. The method of their testing depends on age and personality. Your responses to their actions have a tremendous effect.

Discipline is not a bad word. Children need discipline and structure. Without them, children are likely to be out of control and unsettled. When used properly, discipline is calming.

The following guidelines will help:

- **Unity** – Both parents must agree on what the rules are and what the response to behaviors will be. The same is generally true for childcare providers. Children quickly learn to play one authority figure against another when they sense disagreements.
- **Rules** – Your child must know what is expected of her in advance. You can begin to use rules at about age one. Rules for very young children should generally relate to safety – “Don’t touch the stove.” Older children can understand more complicated rules.
- **Consistency** – Consistency is crucial to molding behavior. Your response to a particular behavior should be the same each time. Otherwise, the child will not know whether the behavior is acceptable or not.
- **Follow through** – If you say it, mean it. Warnings are not a good idea. If you allow a behavior three or four times before reacting, the child does not know what to expect from you and will continue to experiment with the behavior.
- **Control** – Don’t lose your cool. If you respond to your child’s behavior in an emotional way, your discipline will be less effective. It’s OK though to tell your child if you feel angry.
- **Timing** – Your response to behavior should come immediately after the behavior occurs. The longer the delay, the less effective your reaction will be.
- **Honesty** – If you lie to your child in order to get her to behave, you will soon find that all your rules will be tested for truthfulness.
- **Questions** – If there are no choices, don’t ask questions. “Come to the table for dinner” is better than “Do you want to eat dinner?”
- **Modeling** – Don’t expect your child to abide by rules if you don’t.
- **Praise** – This one is really important. When your child behaves well, tell her. Praising good behavior is absolutely essential to discipline.
- **Punishment** – Most behavior experts recommend a technique called “**Time Out.**” It is intended when you want to STOP a behavior. It is not useful for accidents or mildly disruptive or annoying behavior. Don’t use Time Out when you want to INCREASE a behavior. Here are **some tips for success with Time Out:**
  - Choose ONE behavior you want to change. Buy a simple timer. Get a chair and pick a very boring corner of your house. Once you get your equipment together, you are ready to begin.

- As soon as the targeted behavior begins, take your child to the time-out chair. Use no more than ten words on the way. Say things like: “Destroying your toys is not acceptable. Time out!” Do not scold or spank your child. Set the timer. The rule of thumb is one minute per year of age of your child. Put the timer where the child can hear it. Explain that time out is over when the timer rings.
- Stay in the same room with your child. Set up a space for yourself where you can keep an eye on your child. Don’t talk to him or her during time out. Pay no attention whatsoever. Do something else, such as read a magazine. Use your child’s time out as a time to calm yourself down.
- Your child may react to the first time out. He or she may get out of the chair. Simply put your child back in the chair. He or she may kick and scream. Remember, the point of this behavior is to get your attention. Try not to give in unless the child is hurting him or herself. Let older children (over age 7) know that a minute will be added to time out every time they get up. Then the child is aware that the time was added as a result of his or her behavior.
  - From age 2 to 6 – you TAKE your child to time out
  - From age 7 and older – you SEND your child to time out
- Don’t be alarmed if bad behaviors temporarily increase when you begin time out. The child may test to see if you really mean it!

## **A WORD ABOUT BITING**

Social isolation is an effective method for stopping toddlers from biting. If your child bites you, sharply and loudly state, “no biting!”, then put the child down and walk away from him or her. If your child bites another person, again sharply state “no biting,” remove your child from the victim, and carry the victim away from the biting child, giving lots of attention to the victim. When consistently and promptly applied, this method will generally stop biting behavior.

## **A WORD ABOUT SPANKING**

Corporal punishment or “spanking” is an age-old discipline method. However, it is clearly NOT NECESSARY to use physical measures to mold a child’s behavior. There are a number of serious drawbacks to spanking. It teaches the child that physical aggression by a bigger person is acceptable. It is demeaning and can destroy self-esteem. Parents who spank are poor models for their children – “Do as I say, not as I do.” And of course there is the potential for injury to the child.

## **POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT**

Children are eager to please their parents. A parent’s attention, praise, and approval are the most effective methods of achieving a well-behaved child.

**If you are feeling stressed out, call to speak anonymously with a trained volunteer of Parents Anonymous who can provide support and refer you to resources in your community. Family helpline: 1-800-THE-KIDS (1-800-843-5437)**