

PARENT Talk



Dealing with Discipline

Parents walk a fine line when disciplining their children. When are they too lenient? When are they too rigid?

Such questions are difficult because most people use the same disciplining techniques used in their own families, which may not have been the healthiest methods. Fortunately, it's never too late to improve. Though it takes time, thought, and energy, a little improvement goes a long way. It's important for your own children but also for generations to come. Remember, your style likely will influence how your children raise their own children.

The basics

Some people think it's time to discipline when their children are out of control. But discipline should begin long before that. If children receive consistent, loving discipline, they are less likely to become out of control in the first place.

But keep perspective. Parenting has its ups and downs, with smooth and bumpy periods throughout. Difficulties can arise during certain developmental stages of childhood, changes within your family, or other disruptions to your household.

Even during relatively calm periods, many parents have trouble with their children. The most common problems reported by therapists include inconsistency and harsh physical punishment. For instance, a parent may never tell a child "no." Or he or she may say "no" but not mean it. A child needs consistent boundaries to feel safe and to learn self-control.

On the other hand, it's not healthy to physically punish a child. It's best to avoid physical punishment altogether, if possible, because children who are hit learn to solve problems by hitting others. It may control children's behavior but doesn't teach them how to change for the better.

Parents can use the techniques below to discipline their children and to help them.

And it's OK if parents have different discipline styles – as long as each is consistent. Parents should set mutual expectations. But don't worry if one is more strict. Just be sure that your children know what to expect from each of you.

Healthy discipline techniques

It may be difficult to change your style all at once. But read through these discipline tips and set a goal for one improvement each day. Soon, you'll use the good parenting techniques learned from your own parents, and you'll have added skills of your own.

- Let your actions speak for themselves. If you yell, scream, or hit your children, you show them how to behave incorrectly. Use a matter-of-fact, calm voice. Discipline your child immediately, using one of the techniques below.
- Use developmentally appropriate discipline. A toddler will learn from immediate discipline, such as a two-minute "time-out". But he or she won't understand if you discipline two hours later. For instance, an older child who misbehaved at school will understand if you discipline him or her that evening.

- Be firm but kind. Tell your child the consequences of bad behavior. Then, when he or she acts up, follow through. For instance, if you told your child that he must sit in a "time-out" chair for five minutes if he pinches his brother, make him serve his time if he acts up.
- Make clear rules for behavior. If you have decided that certain behaviors will land a child in his room without TV for the evening, make it clear.
- Match the discipline to the situation, and make sure your children know that they will suffer the consequences if they break rules. Look for a connection between the misbehavior and the discipline. For instance, you may tell your child, "You have a choice. You may clean your room by 10 a.m. or not. If you don't, I will. But I will keep everything I pick up for one week, and you will not be able to use them." You'll find out your child's choice by checking at 10 a.m. Another example: What if you hear your older child using racial or ethnic slurs? You may punish him or her, but also assign a reading to build empathy in your child.
- Reward good behavior. Catch your child behaving well and praise him or her. Praise good choices. Teach them to evaluate their own behavior and to reinforce themselves.
- Allow children to make mistakes. When you talk to them, focus on the problem, not the person. Instead of saying, "You're lazy, and you're in trouble," say: "Your room is still a mess, and it's past the deadline. There are consequences, but what can you do to make sure it doesn't happen again?" Don't withhold love or affection when your child makes a mistake.
- Set routines for meals, bedtime, and chores. Children need a routine to feel safe and to learn self-control. Young children need a warning between activities, so you might tell your toddler, "In five minutes, it's bath time. Then, you'll have a snack and get ready for bed." And follow up.
- When you say "no", have a reason. It's important that your children obey you, but it's also important that they know your reasons. This way, they'll learn to reason for themselves. They'll learn to trust your judgment.
- Give kids a voice. Even children as young as 5 or 6 can help set their own limits. Let them decide what certain punishments should be for breaking rules. Then, post the rules. Children are more likely to obey rules if they feel they're fair and if they have a voice in making them.
- Remember that you're the parent. Some rules, you have to set yourself. And when you stick to the rules, your child may not be happy. Be fair and patient, and make sure you accept your child's feelings of anger or frustration. "It's hard to leave when you're having fun, but it's time to go."

If you need help Sometimes, parents need help. Ask for advice now rather than let problems escalate. Or call Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. ©

