

# Raising Well-Behaved Kids:

## What Parents Should Know

*My kids just won't listen.*

*Spanking stops my kids temporarily, but then they just act up again.*

*I lose my temper with my children and feel terrible afterwards.*

Raising well-behaved kids is hard. There is no "right way" to do it, but there are some methods that work better than others. This handout is designed to provide some helpful hints, and set the tone for a peaceful and happy home.

### Notice the first signs of anger.

It's important to remain calm when you discipline your children. It's hard to think carefully about the best course of action to take once you're mad. When you react out of anger, your response may be more a way of releasing your anger (by hitting and screaming) than an effective way of teaching your child to change a behavior.

Common anger signs include:

- Clenching your teeth or fists
- Breathing fast
- Pounding heart
- Hot face or ears
- Not thinking clearly
- Wanting to hit something
- Cracking or loud voice



**TAKE CHARGE:** During the next week, pay attention to times you are angry and how your body feels when you are angry.

Each person expresses anger differently. Learn the signs that *you* are getting angry.

## Cool down before disciplining your children.

These activities will give you time to calm down so that you can think through a tense situation. You can come up with a parenting strategy that helps your children do what you want them to do without your doing and saying things you may be sorry for later.

- Count to 10 and take deep breaths (relaxes the body).
- If it's possible to take a short break from the situation, do something else relaxing for a few minutes (take a bath or listen to music).



**TAKE CHARGE:** During the next week, try one or more of these activities to help calm yourself down.

- Exercise, move around, or go for a walk to get rid of some energy.
  - Imagine yourself in a beautiful, peaceful place like a quiet beach.
  - Remind yourself that it's okay to be an imperfect parent.
  - Remind yourself that this moment will pass.
- Remind yourself that your child may not be trying to make you angry on purpose.
  - Get another adult involved (either to solve the problem or just to talk with you).
  - Think of as many reasons as you can for why you're angry (hint: some reasons might not have anything to do with your child) and write them down so you can put them aside and focus on your child's behavior.

## Learn effective ways to get your children to do what you want.

It can be frustrating when the punishment you use isn't getting the response you want from your child. Sometimes parents find themselves using the same punishment over and over again for the same misbehavior, even when it doesn't seem to be effective, because they don't know what else to do, or because other strategies have also failed.

The next section lists forms of discipline that have been shown to work most effectively in changing children's behavior. For these techniques to work, it's important to use them consistently, use all the steps suggested, and give them a little time. Be ready for your kids to act out more at first. They may find the change threatening, and it is normal for them to test you to make sure you're serious about your new approach.

Stick with these approaches, and over time, their behavior should get better.

### Improve your relationship.

Children who have a good relationship with their parents may act out from time to time, but ultimately they want to please their parents and make them proud. Having a good relationship is the best way to get your children to do what you want. Show them your love, respect, and admiration in ways that feel comfortable to you. Play with them and let them take the lead—it's how they learn and it will bring you closer. Laugh at what they think is funny. Let them teach you how to do something.



With older kids, try *active listening*. Active listening is when you give your children your full attention, summarize what they are saying, and listen without judging or telling them what to do. For example, when teenagers talk to you about what their friends are doing, ask them to imagine the consequences of the behaviors they're considering. Is the approval of their peers worth the possible consequences? What are some alternate behaviors? That way, they'll learn to make smart decisions with your support.

### **State your case in ways that increase cooperation.**

- Let your children know how they will be rewarded when they do what you want. For example, tell them they can watch TV when they are done with their homework.
- Give them choices. For example, ask your child if she or he would like to wear a sweater or a jacket. Only give choices that you are really okay with.
- Time your requests so that they are at a natural break point in your children's activity. This decreases resistance, shows them respect, and makes it more likely that they will hear you and cooperate.
- Don't ask a "yes" or "no" question if "no" isn't an option. For example, don't say, "Will you get ready for school?" if not getting ready isn't an option. Say, instead, "Please get ready for school now so we can eat breakfast together and don't have to rush."

### **Focus on the positive.**

Children learn best from praise and rewards. They naturally crave praise from the people who take care of them. They will behave the way you want them to if doing so makes them feel good. Praise and reward behaviors you approve of, ignore the behaviors that are irritating or annoying. For example, ignore children when they scream for a toy and praise them when they ask for it nicely. Do not ignore those behaviors that are unsafe.



### **Praise**

Praise is telling a child that she or he did something well or something you liked.

- Be purely positive with your praise and avoid negative talk. For example, when you say, "Thank you for staying quiet while I was on the phone," a child feels good. If you say, "Thank you for staying quiet while I was on the phone. Why don't you do that all the time?" a child feels bad. When kids feel good about doing something, they are more likely to do it again.
- Be specific. That way, a child knows what to do the next time. For example, say "Christopher, I like how you washed the dishes." It is more specific and preferable to "Good job, Christopher."
- Provide praise as soon as possible after a child does what you want the child to do.
- Be consistent with your praise. The more consistent you are, the more quickly the behavior will change.

## Reward

- Reward a child for behaving well. For example, point out when your children are playing quietly together, tell them they have earned a reward and then let them choose. Examples of rewards might be going to the park, playing a board game with you, an extra bedtime story, or staying up late to watch a favorite TV show. You don't need to spend money to give your children rewards. If you are not sure what will be rewarding to your children, ask them.



**TAKE CHARGE:** Choose one behavior you want to see more of and praise your child every time he/she does it over the next week.

- Let them know what the reward is before you ask them to do something. For example, "After you finish cleaning your room, we can play a game."
- Use behavior charts. Set up a plan where your children can earn what they want by doing what you want. It is important to review the behavior chart every day with the child.

## Set clear consequences.

When trying to stop a problem behavior, it's helpful to decide on consequences ahead of time and talk to your children about them. That way, you won't have to think about your options and make a decision "in the heat of the moment." Punishments decided ahead of time are usually more appropriate, less of a knee-jerk reaction, and less of a surprise to your children. Examples of appropriate and effective consequences include:

- **Active ignoring**—Children will do just about anything for attention. Therefore, when you pay attention to behavior even to correct it, the child may do it more. Active ignoring is purposefully ignoring your child's minor negative behavior to get her or him to stop. It is appropriate for minor misbehavior, such as interrupting conversations, and works best when combined with giving the child positive attention and praise for appropriate good behavior.
- **Time outs**—Time outs are appropriate for children ages 2–10 who refuse to do what they are asked and engage in aggressive or disruptive behavior. Remove the child from receiving attention and doing fun things for a short time. Choose a boring place, free of distraction. Have the child sit on a chair away from the family and TV for one minute for each year of age (five minutes for a five-year-old). Do not talk to or lecture the child during this time because that is also a form of attention. If the time out was because the child refused to do something he or she was told, instruct the child to do the task after the time out is completed.
- **Work chores**—Give the child an age-appropriate chore that the child doesn't enjoy doing, and that isn't on his or her chore list. For example, "Because you hit your brother, you have to sweep the floor."
- **Removal of activity or toy**—Remove a toy or an activity that the child likes. The length of time without the activity or toy should be based on the child's age. Shorter times are better than longer times. For example, taking a toy away for 15 minutes from a three-year-old who hit her brother with the toy is better than taking it away for a week. With shorter times, your child is more likely to remember why the toy was removed and associate it

with the misbehavior. Making the punishment too long (like grounding a child for three months) loses its effectiveness because the child has no incentive to behave. In the child's mind it comes down to, "Why should I listen? I'm already grounded." Removal of an activity or toy can also be used if a child refuses to go to a time out or do a chore.

Whatever consequences you choose, be sure to follow through with them. Avoid making empty threats; they teach children that you don't always mean what you say. And remember, consequences work best when used in combination with the positive approaches listed above.



**TAKE CHARGE:** Try one or two of these consequences for at least one month and track how often your child does the behavior you don't like.

If your child's behavior gets better over time, congratulations! If it doesn't, you may want to keep up the good work and just give it more time. Also, think about whether you are using the techniques consistently and as recommended. Consistency is the hardest part of parenting. Whether we are talking about discipline, or maintaining routines, such as those around bedtimes, lots of studies tell us that consistency is the healthiest approach for children. If you're following all of the recommendations and your child's behavior still isn't improving, it may be time to get some help.

### If needed, get professional help.

If you feel frustrated and would like help managing your children's behavior, help is available. Therapy can help reduce parents' stress, help parents get their children to behave better, help kids feel better about themselves, and help kids learn how to control their own behavior. You can also contact:

- **National Child Abuse Hotline**  
1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)
- **Dial 211**  
211 is a 24-hour national referral service available in most states. It provides resources such as referrals to physical and mental health care providers, as well as support for children, adolescents, and families



Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

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