

Principles and Practices of Effective Discipline:

Advice for Parents

By Elizabeth T. Gershoff, Ph.D.

Disciplining children is one of the most important – and hardest – jobs parents have. Yet few of us are ever taught how to discipline our children effectively. Most of us learn “on the job” or repeat what our parents did with us. This unfortunately means we use discipline methods that are familiar but not effective.

This pamphlet summarizes four main principles of positive and effective discipline that have developed from years of work with children and families. Under each principle are suggestions for ways to put the principle into practice.

Guide, Not Punish

Principle:

The goal of discipline is to teach children acceptable behavior. Children learn how to behave only when you tell or show them how. Punishment shows children what *not to do*; only guidance and teaching show children what *to do*. Children will behave better when they are motivated by the promise of rewards rather than by threats of punishment.

Practices:

- ◆ Be realistic, and expect a child to act like a child.
- ◆ View children's misbehavior as a mistake in judgment. Often what an adult sees as misbehavior is really the result of a child trying to learn about his or her environment.
- ◆ Show by your example how to behave appropriately and how you manage your own anger and frustration.
- ◆ With children younger than three years old, use removal from the situation, redirections, distraction, or supervision. No form of punishment is appropriate for children of these ages.

- ◆ With children three years old or older, give them practice in making choices when it is reasonable for them to do so. For example, saying “Which do you want to do first—brush your teeth or take a bath?” presumes the child will be doing both but allows the child to feel a small measure of control over the order of events. Providing children the opportunity to choose between safe choices will give them the chance to experience the consequences of their choices.
- ◆ Use words – not hitting – to discipline your child. No one has a right to hit anyone else in the household, and that includes hitting children for misbehavior. Remember, discipline is all about teaching. Children learn how to treat others by how they are treated. If you hit children, you are teaching them that violence is an acceptable problem-solving tool.
- ◆ When punishments are necessary, make them logical consequences to the child’s behavior with reasons. For example:
 - 1) If a three year-old writes on the wall, have him or her help you clean it off.
The reason you give: As a member of the family, he or she is expected to respect and to help take care of your home.
 - 2) If an eight-year-old runs into the street, say he or she has to stay inside for the rest of the day.
The reason you give: You have to be sure he or she stays safe.
 - 3) If a sixteen year-old comes home after curfew, he or she is not allowed to go out at night the following weekend.
The reason you give: He or she has betrayed your trust and needs to earn it again before you can let him or her stay out late.
- ◆ Use teaching time-outs. If children need to be removed from a problem situation, send them to a time out area until they can come up with a plan for improved behavior. If they are still in time-out after a reasonable amount of time (never more than 5-10 minutes), go to them and help them create a plan. Using time outs this way, you are teaching children to behave in appropriate ways, to solve-problems, and to take responsibility for their own behavior.

Focus on the Positives

Principle:

Effective discipline hinges on a positive, trusting, and respectful relationship between you and your child. When you develop a positive relationship with your child, he or she will be more motivated to behave well.

Practices:

- ◆ Each day, be sure to give your child as many “positives” – such as hugs, encouragement, praise, or guidance – and to engage in as few “negatives” – such as yelling, spanking, or shaming – as you can.
- ◆ Catch your child being good. The best way to encourage children to repeat a positive behavior is to praise them for doing it.
- ◆ Develop a trusting relationship with your child by protecting them from harm, by being honest and trustworthy, and by exhibiting predictable and mature behavior. If you make a mistake in dealing with children, tell them you are sorry. Apologies build trust.
- ◆ Frame things positively by telling your child the behavior you expect, not just what you do not want them to do. Some examples include, “Keep your hands to yourself” (instead of, “Stop hitting your sister”) and “When you clean up your room, you can go outside to play” (instead of, “You cannot go outside to play until you clean up your room”).
- ◆ Always express disappointment in the behaviors, never in the children themselves. Children need to know that you will always love them, even when you are not always happy about their choice of behavior.
- ◆ Spend some time each day focused entirely on your child. Children sometimes misbehave in order to get any attention from their busy parents. If you spend positive time with your child, he or she will not need to misbehave to get your attention. Some examples include:
 - 1) sitting with your child and talking about his or her day
 - 2) making a meal or snack together
 - 3) playing a game together
 - 4) taking a walk around the neighborhood together
 - 5) reading a story together

Be Prepared

Principle:

A crucial component of effective discipline is providing guidelines and expectations for appropriate behavior ahead of time. In other words, parents’ discipline work consists not only of reacting to misbehavior but also of preparing children for situations and

providing clear expectations for how they should behave. Such preparation can prevent children from misbehaving in the first place.

Practices:

- ◆ Establish a few important yet reasonable limits and guidelines for your child's behaviors and explain them to your child. Keep in mind that you will need to repeat these explanations over time to be sure your child remembers and accepts them.
- ◆ Create a safe environment for your child. Put unsafe things out of reach. Infants and young children should always be supervised by an adult.
- ◆ Explain to your child the behavior you expect ahead of time, as well as what the clear and reasonable consequences will be if they do not behave appropriately.
- ◆ Be prepared for difficult situations. Explain to your child ahead of time what they can expect even when it may be unpleasant (e.g., waiting in long lines, going to the doctor's office). Bring along snacks and toys to distract your child and keep him or her busy.

Be Consistent

Principle:

Children thrive on consistency. When they know their world is predictable and certain, children know they can behave in ways that "worked" in the past. When life is unpredictable and uncertain, children do not know what to expect and cannot rely on their past experiences to know how to act. Providing children with a consistent environment allows them to use what they have learned about what is and is not appropriate behavior in given situations and contexts.

Practices:

- ◆ Always follow through on consequences you have established ahead of time.
- ◆ If children earn a reward for good behavior, never take it away for inappropriate behavior.
- ◆ Provide a consistent routine for your child. Whenever possible have regular times for meals, studying, and bedtime.

- ◆ When your child misbehaves, explain why that choice of behavior was inappropriate and ask him or her to generate suggestions for how they can make better choices next time they are in a similar situation.

- ◆ Remember that being consistent does not mean being rigid. Any form of discipline will not work with all children all of the time. Being an effective disciplinarian means being willing to adapt your discipline *practices* to a specific child or situation while still being consistent in your disciplinary *principles*. If circumstances change, it is reasonable for you to change rules and expectations if a situation requires it.

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