



Positive Discipline

Misbehavior can be thought of as an opportunity for teaching new behavior. Another way of looking at misbehavior is that the child is communicating the need for help in directing her behavior. When parents can ask themselves, "What can I teach my child?" or "How can I guide or help my child with his behavior?" they adopt an attitude of respect, which they will receive back from the child when he is older.

How to help your child behave appropriately

- "Do as I do." The most powerful teaching skill is modeling the behavior that is expected from the child. Children have always imitated the adults in their lives. They will copy manner, tone of voice, language, and actions, both appropriate and inappropriate. Setting a good example is critical in parenting.
- Talk respectfully. Communicating with a child cannot be done effectively from a distance. The time spent talking to a child and making eye contact with her is quality time. Parents who remember to talk to their children as they talk to their friends discover that their children pay closer attention to what they say.
- Tell them what you want. Children respond better to being told what to do rather than what not to do. For example:

Instead of...

"Don't hit the kitty."
"Stop kicking the table."

Say

"Touch the kitty gently."
"Keep your feet on the floor."

- Make some rules. A few necessary, clear, and reasonable limits that are enforced consistently give children the security that parents are helping them behave. Too many rules set everyone up for failure because they cannot be remembered and they cannot be enforced with consistency. Rules are for protecting the health, safety, and property rights of the child and others.
- Give chances to choose. Giving a child choices allows him some appropriate power over his life and encourages decision making. The choices offered must be within acceptable limits and the child's developmental and temperamental abilities. The parent may say the rule and then the choice. For example: "It's bedtime. Do you want one story or two?" or "It's time

to go to the car. Do you want to walk with giant steps or baby steps?" As children grow older, they may be offered a wider variety of choices and allowed to accept the consequences of their choices.

- Pay attention. Most children spend a great percentage of the time behaving appropriately, and parents need to notice. Positive behavior will increase if we give it attention. "You shared your snack with your sister," "Thank you for putting your toys away," "You got dressed all by yourself."
- Make an investment. Each child needs some individual attention every day—talking, playing, singing, reading, etc. It's the best investment a parent can make!

How to handle misbehavior...

In spite of the best planning and positive parenting, there will still be some misbehavior. Some helpful responses include:

- **Ignoring.** This works best with a new, annoying but not harmful behavior like bad language or tantrums. Effective ignoring involves not talking to or looking at the child or using any body language that indicates attention.
- **Redirecting.** This approach involves helping the child find an alternative activity that is similar to what he was doing. "I can't let you throw your truck, but you may throw the ball outside." or "You may not kick the door, but you may kick this ball or plastic milk jug."
- **Cooling off.** Hurtful behavior or an angry outburst can sometimes be helped by a cooling off period. A cooling off period is not used as a punishment. The child can be sent to a calming place to rest, read, or do something pleasant until he gains control of himself and changes his behavior. A cooling off period is also a good way for adults to calm down before taking action and to demonstrate an acceptable way of handling anger.
- **Allowing consequences.** A favorite jacket left outdoors is rained on and can't be worn to school, or riding a tricycle into the street means having to go indoors for a while. We help children learn to be responsible when we allow them to experience the consequences of their choices.

Remember, the goal of discipline is not to control children and make them obey, but to give them skills for making decisions, gradually gaining self-control, and being responsible for their own behavior.

For more information call your County Health Department.