

# Questions & Answers about positive discipline

As children grow, they must pass through the experiences of childhood. Discipline problems are a normal part of raising children and give you an opportunity to teach children new skills. Parents who use positive discipline guide their children's behavior in a caring way, which can help children learn these new skills. Positive minded parents help teach young children the coping skills and self-control they will need to avoid misbehaving. As your children's first teachers, you know that discipline is important in order to protect them, help them get along with others, and teach them to understand limits and acceptable behavior.

Teaching children self-discipline is a difficult task for parents—it requires patience, attention, cooperation, and understanding. There is no one right way to discipline. Each child is different. A discipline strategy that might work with one child may not work with another; a technique that works one day may fail the next. To work well, the approach used by parents should match a child's unique needs and age level. Effective discipline focuses on the development of the child and preserves the child's dignity and self-esteem.

## 1. What kind of behavior can I expect as my child grows?

From birth to age 2, children learn primarily through their senses and physical activity. They need to be held, talked to, comforted, and reassured that parents will be there for them when they need them. In

disciplining toddlers, it is important to remember that they don't communicate like you do; they can try your patience, they cannot share, and they cannot plan their own days. The keys to disciplining a toddler are love, understanding, and quick thinking!

Between the ages of 2 and 6,

children learn by exploring and asking many questions. They learn language and some social skills, including how to share with others. They also want to do things by themselves. They like to try new things and will often take risks.

From age 6 to age 12, children begin to develop more self-control. They can process information and make decisions. They are able to follow rules and accept responsibility. Children during this stage begin to develop an image of themselves that will help to shape who they will become through the teen years and into adulthood.

## 2. What are some effective discipline techniques for toddlers?

- Set up a safe environment. "Toddler proof" your home and create a safe place for your children to play.
- Establish routines based on children's needs for eating, sleeping, and play.
- Remove children from dangerous situations.
- Distract children from doing something unacceptable or dangerous (*playing with something breakable*) to another

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activity.

- Redirect children by teaching them a different way of doing the same thing. “We don’t color on the table. Here is some paper for coloring.”
- Ignore misbehavior when it is safe to do so.
- Praise and encourage children to promote learning, independence, and positive self-esteem.
- Show children the natural and logical results of their actions to give them an opportunity to learn from the choices they make.
- Set a good example. Children learn more by watching adults than in any other way.
- Give your child choices that will avoid power struggles. “Would you like apple slices or raisins for your snack today?”

### **3. I feel like I say “no” to my two-year-old son a thousand times a day. Is there something I can do to avoid being so negative?**

Try using more actions and fewer words. Keep explanations short because young children have difficulty focusing on too many details. Be sure to follow through on your words. If your son and a playmate are fighting over a toy, simply remove the toy for a while. If your son is getting into his older brother’s video game collection, gently but firmly take him away and show him another activity. If you tell your son you will put the blocks up if he throws them, then do it—no words are necessary.

### **4. My 2½-year-old daughter occasionally hits a playmate when she comes to visit and when my daughter doesn’t get her way. How can I stop this kind of harmful behavior?**

Young children are just beginning to develop language and social skills, and when they play together they can become easily upset and begin hitting instead of using words to say what is wrong. It is important to stay calm but act quickly. Give the friend your attention first and reassure her. Then calmly and firmly tell your daughter that it is okay to be upset, but hitting is not allowed because it hurts others. Give both children comforting hugs and then show them a quiet activity so that both have time to calm down. Wait a few minutes and then talk with your daughter about what caused her to be upset and ways to show her feelings differently in the future. A hug will reassure her that you still love her even though she misbehaved.

### **5. What are some positive discipline strategies for preschool children?**

- Set up a safe environment.
- Establish routines based on children’s needs for eating, sleeping, and play.
- Set a good example. Children learn more by watching adults than in any other way. When children ask “why,” explain things in simple terms.
- Praise and encourage children to promote learning,

independence, and positive self-esteem.

- Use positive time out when children need a cooling-off period.
- Choose words carefully to focus on what children should do rather than what not to do. Say “*Come hold my hand*” instead of “*Don’t touch anything.*”
- Use natural and logical consequences to give children an opportunity to learn from the choices they make. See related Q&A.
- Keep children from doing something unacceptable (*jumping on the bed, pulling the cat’s tail*) by showing them another activity.
- Redirect children by teaching them a different way of doing the same thing. “You can build a fort in the living room but not on the kitchen table.”
- Give your child choices that will avoid power struggles. “Would you like to take your bath before or after we read a story tonight?”
- Ignore undesirable behavior by not paying attention to it. DO NOT use this strategy if the child’s behavior is dangerous.
- Reward good behavior with praise rather than punish misbehavior. You can give out rewards, but beware that children might begin to place more importance on the reward than on their behavior.
- When children damage something, they need to help fix or clean up their mistakes.
- Establish rules and set clear limits. Follow through when

rules are broken or limits are not honored.

**6. My five and 3½-year-old daughters are always tattling on one another. What can I do to end this behavior?**

Listen respectfully to their problems but do not attempt to solve them or spend time trying to determine who is to blame. Invite your children to talk about the situation and use their problem-solving skills to work things out. You might ask, “*What ideas do you have to solve this problem?*” or state, “*I’m sure the two of you can work it out.*” If they are arguing over something such as who will go first in a game, let them know that until they find a solution, they can’t continue to play that game.

**7. My four-year-old son always whines whenever he wants something. I find myself giving in just to stop him from whining. What can I do to stop him from doing this?**

There are a variety of things you can try. Here are some suggestions:

- Ignore the behavior. Listen and respond when he makes a request without whining.
- Give him “one whine” a day.
- Say, “*Whenever you whine, the answer is No.*”
- Say, “*I will not listen to whining*” and when it starts, leave the room.
- Say, “*I will not listen to whining. Please ask me for*

*what you want nicely*” and give the child a chance to respond without whining.

**8. What are some positive ways to discipline school-age children?**

- **Set a good example.** Children learn more by watching adults than in any other way. When children ask “why,” explain things in simple terms.
- Praise and encourage children to promote learning, independence, and positive self-esteem.
- Use positive time out when children need a cooling-off period.
- Use natural and logical consequences to give children an opportunity to learn from the choices they make. See related Q&A.
- Ignore misbehavior by not paying attention to it. DO NOT use this strategy if the child’s behavior is dangerous.
- Reward good behavior with praise rather than punish misbehavior. You can give out rewards, but be aware that children might begin to place more importance on the reward than on their behavior.
- Give your child choices that will avoid power struggles. “*Would you like to do your homework before or after dinner?*”
- When children damage something, they need to help fix or clean up their mistakes.
- Establish rules and set clear limits; follow through when rules are broken or limits are violated.

**9. My son and daughter, ages 9 and 7, are always fighting in the back seat of the car. How can I make these rides more pleasant for everyone?**

Involve your children in a family meeting to discuss the problem. Ask them for ideas of what will make car trips more enjoyable and discuss family safety rules. Tell them when there are problems in the back seat, you will be pulling over to the side of the road until things calm down. When problems start in the back seat, simply pull over without saying a word. When the kids have worked things out, proceed. On long trips, make sure children take along toys and books, and make frequent stops to allow them to run off some energy.

**10. Is spanking ever a good idea?**

Spanking, slapping, or hitting children will get their attention, but it doesn’t do a very good job of teaching children how to behave. Striking a child can be so upsetting that he or she can’t pay attention to what a parent is saying; it is difficult to reason with a screaming child. Spanking doesn’t teach children what is expected of them or how to behave in the future. Using physical punishment teaches the child that aggressive acts are an acceptable way to solve problems and may lead to abuse. Physical punishment may also encourage children to act out toward other children. Additionally, physical punish-

ment can discourage and embarrass children and lower their self-esteem. It shows that a parent has lost control and is reacting emotionally instead of with thoughtfulness and understanding.

### **11. What are some alternatives to spanking?**

Physical alternatives to spanking include gently taking children by the hand and redirecting them, picking them up gently or holding them to remove them from a dangerous situation and to get their attention. There are many *non*-physical ways including drawing children's attention elsewhere, ignoring their misbehavior, and showing them the results of their actions, depending upon the situation and the child.

### **12. What should I do when I feel myself about to lose control and strike my child?**

If you start to slap your child, walk away from the situation for a few minutes and allow yourself to calm down and think about what to do before reacting purely on emotion.

### **13. Are there other harmful discipline methods that parents should avoid?**

Criticizing, discouraging, blaming, and shaming children as well as using cruel humor can be harmful to children's self-esteem. Be respectful of children's dignity; separate their misbehavior from your love for them and help them find ways

to improve their behavior while keeping their self-esteem positive. Most parents are looking for quick answers to the problem, which often results in children feeling overpowered. Parenting "with the end in mind" looks at long-term solutions that will help children learn to manage their own behavior.

### **14. If children never get punished, won't they get spoiled?**

Punishing children does not keep them from being spoiled. Children who are spoiled have parents who do too much for them instead of guiding them to learn to do things for themselves. The best way not to spoil children is to show them you love and care for them, but set and enforce clear rules about behavior.

### **15. How can I discipline my son without giving him the message that he is a "bad child?"**

Never tell a child that he is bad, lazy, stupid, a failure, or any other put down. Help him learn how to change his behavior. Although all children may misbehave, they need to feel loved, regardless of what they may do. You can say, "I don't like the way you acted at the soccer game, but I still love you." Remind him that everyone makes mistakes and these are chances to learn and grow.

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