



First Steps

45

Teaching Children through Positive Discipline and Guidance

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

Parents have the responsibility to guide, correct, and help their children learn correct social behaviors. Teaching children to behave is not easy. It requires patience, consistency, paying attention, teamwork, and a good understanding of the child. It is impossible to keep children from misbehaving completely. However, it is not impossible to teach children behaviors that keep them safe, keep others safe, and make them welcome in any setting.



The types of discipline strategies parents use influence the type of person a child becomes. Parents who teach their child what acceptable behavior means, help their child develop into a responsible and enjoyable person who is pleasant to be around. Few people like to be near a child who is out of control, bad-mannered, or unkind to others. Children who grow up without being disciplined are often frustrated and unhappy. They are frequently scolded or punished for misbehaving, and other children don't want to play with them. With the right guidance, children will know how to behave even when no one is watching them.

What Should Parents Understand about Positive Discipline?

- Children learn by copying what they see others do. When parents model good behaviors, children will copy them (treating others kindly, sharing, helping, etc.).
- Children should never be shamed or put down for misbehaving. Calling your child a name like “bad girl” only serves to damage her feelings of self worth rather than correct her behavior.
- Children need to be praised for good behavior more than they need to be scolded for bad behavior. This really works!
- Children are not born knowing what behaviors are okay and what are not. You must be patient and consistent in teaching them how to behave properly in several situations.
- Children are much more likely to behave the way parents want them to when they understand the rules.
- Children should not be expected to do as they are told if the request is beyond their developmental level. A two-year-old can help pick up her toys, but she cannot vacuum the carpet, for example.



Strategies Parents Can Use to Reinforce Positive Discipline

- During the first two years, your best strategies will be mainly to distract and then interest your child in some more suitable activity. Instead of moving your toddler from the breakable decoration over and over again and telling her “no” each time, move the decoration out of sight and out of reach. Then interest your child in a different activity.
- Get to eye level with your child and maintain eye contact before and while you’re giving directions or explanations.
- Use your child’s name to get his attention. Say, “Mark, please....”
- Keep your statement short and simple. “Mark, please pick up your crayons and put them in the box.”
- Have your child repeat the directions to you. If she is unable to do so, your directions were not clear or were too difficult for her to understand.
- Make your child want to obey. “Sally, when you finish picking up your toys, we can go outside to play on the swing.”
- Be positive. Instead of yelling “No screaming!” say in a soft voice, “Please use your inside voice.” Tell your child what you want her to do, not what she shouldn’t be doing.
- Offer a couple of choices. “Do you want your blue jacket or your red sweater?” allows your child to choose. She can’t choose not to wear either, but she can choose one over the other.
- Allow for natural and logical consequences when doing so won’t put your child at risk. For example, if your child refuses to pick up his toys, then you will pick them up, but will not allow him to play with them for a day or so.
- If your child damages something, he needs to help fix it or clean it up. If he hurts another child, he needs to apologize and help to comfort that child.
- Point your child in the right direction when you can see that she is not following the rules or is becoming a problem. Get her attention and introduce a different activity. “Katie, please come help me feed the dog. It’s Jack’s turn to ride the tricycle now.”
- In more serious situations, the child should be removed to spend time alone in a specific quiet and comfortable place. Have him rest or play alone for a few minutes. Usually one minute for each year of your child’s age is long enough. Being alone will help your child calm down and gives him time to think about what he has done.
- At the end of this time, calmly explain to your child what behavior is appropriate and allow him to go back to playing. Time alone works best if it is used to shape behavior rather than to punish it.

(Source: Lynch, Maureen. “Alternative Discipline Strategies”, State University of New York-Albany)



No matter how old your child is, one of the best gifts you can give him is the chance to grow up with both respect and limits. This is what a positive discipline and guidance approach will do for your child. Give more attention and praise for good behavior and less attention for bad behavior. Be clear and firm when you tell your child what she needs to do or not do. Work out problems patiently as they come up. Guide your child to the behaviors you expect before you get angry and frustrated. Positive discipline is a way of showing your child how to be and how to act. It takes more time and effort to discipline positively than to punish, but it is definitely worth the time.

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.