A Letter to
parents of young
children

Positive Discipline

Dear Parents,

Of all the responsibilities of parenthood, discipline of children probably raises the most questions and dilemmas for parents. What is discipline? It is all of our attempts to teach children correct behavior, values and self-control. How we discipline depends on many things, including:

How we were disciplined. The way we were disciplined and how we feel about it helps determine what we expect of our own children.

What we want for our children. We value certain things more than others. Our priorities help determine our hopes and dreams for our children and what we will and will not tolerate from them.

How we see ourselves as parents. The way we think other adults judge us as parents helps determine how we "play" our role and what we expect of our children.

What is happening at the time. What we want to accomplish in a given time period or day will affect our expectations of our children.

It takes many years for children to learn correct behavior, values and self-control because they require a lot of practice and learn in small steps as they grow and develop. At first, discipline is a matter of structuring the environment. Instead of giving babies instructions to follow such as, "Don't fall off the couch," we put them in safe places like cribs and infant seats so they are protected from harm.

Later, as children begin to understand language, we can use word directions like, "That's yucky! Don't eat it." As their ability to think develops, they can understand reasons such as, "Eating mother's plants can make you sick. Eat this apple instead."

By the time most children reach two or three years of age, they seem to have so many adult characteristics—the ability to walk, talk and think. However, young children have a long way to go before they can behave like an adult.

To do a good job of disciplining, parents need to be aware of how children grow and develop, how to organize their children's environment (surroundings) to prevent problems, and positive discipline strategies.

How Children Grow and Develop

Normal growth and development between one and six years of age is briefly discussed in this section. The resource list at the end of the bulletin suggests several books that provide much more information.

By one year, children are probably saying a word or two and may have taken a first step or are just ready to walk. They are easily distracted from what they are doing. They use their hands to grasp, pick up and investigate things and feed themselves (which can be quite messy). These children are usually cooperative, interested in things and enthusiastic about play. They need to feel safe and to trust caregivers.

By two years of age, most children walk quite well and are constantly on the move. They often seem obstinate and say "no" a lot as they try to do things for themselves. They generally have a vocabulary of a dozen words, or so. Two's may play with another child for short periods of time but generally play by themselves or alongside other children. They find it very hard to share. These children need adults who are reliable and patient.

By three years of age, children are interested in pleasing and helping adults. They have a fairly large vocabulary. They may be toilet trained but still have accidents. Three's enjoy playing with small groups of children of the same age for longer periods of time, but still like to play alone. They need adults who encourage independence and feelings of worth, allow lots of time to look, explore and
Negative methods of discipline include using shame or ridicule, employing harsh disciplinary methods, or threatening punishment. Positive methods of discipline utilize knowledge of how children develop and discipline strategies that teach children self-control. In the long run, positive strategies are more effective and more conducive to better relationships between parents and children.

By four years, children are full of energy and exuberance and often think they are more capable than they really are. They love all kinds of words, including those that adults think are “bad.” However, children generally do not understand what the words mean. They are just beginning to understand the difference between real and pretend. Four’s enjoy being with other children and need playmates of the same age. They also need adults who can set and enforce appropriate limits without using harsh punishment.

By five years, children love being "grown up." They are usually affectionate, cooperative and talkative. They often recognize letters, words and numbers and love to hear stories. Five’s generally like to conform to the rules and report others who don’t. They find it hard to laugh at themselves and are embarrassed by their mistakes or accidents, and may blame someone else. They like to please adults and be praised by them and can take responsibility for simple tasks. They need adults who respect and approve of them and give them opportunities to learn independently while keeping an eye on their safety.

By six years, children are beginning to develop a joy and enthusiasm in everything about them. School and other children become very important to them and these influences are often reflected in their behavior. In this stage of development, they can be easily over-tired, may be bossy and tattle on others. They can be very competitive, aggressive and very self-centered. They may have fears or bad dreams, find it hard to make decisions and like routines to stay the same. Six’s need adults who are patient, accepting and understand that they are working hard to grow up.

Preparing the Child’s Environment

Many discipline problems can be avoided with a little planning and rearranging of children’s living space. All children (and adults too) love to touch, handle and examine interesting objects they see. Because children learn by examining, it makes sense to remove fragile and unsafe objects. This prevents the necessity of repeated reminders not to touch and is easier on the children and adults. Generally, by four years of age children understand what can and cannot be touched. However, all potentially dangerous substances, such as cleaning products, paints and medications, must be stored in childproof containers and out of reach cupboards.

Children are remarkably ingenious at exploring and opening things. Even six year olds can forget the rules.

There are many ways adults can help children learn and practice the skills necessary for self-help and self-control. For example, put a sturdy stool by the bathroom sink so they can reach the faucets and store play materials at a level that they can easily reach.

Using Appropriate Discipline

Appropriate discipline considers the child, the behavior and the situation because misbehavior is often the result of a number of things working together.

We all have occasional bad days and children do too. Their tolerance of frustration or failure is much lower than an adult’s, so it takes less to set off tears or a tantrum. Other factors, such as the child’s health, stage of development and emotional state also affect behavior. Illness coming on and changes in the family, for example, can often precipitate discipline problems.

Always remember the child’s stage of development. Knowing that two-and-a-half year olds aren’t able to use language or reason very well helps you understand that the only way Sam could think of to get the truck back from Charlie was to hit him. Sam needs to have you tell him what to do and the words to use rather than spank him because he hit and wouldn’t share. Knowing that four-year-olds are just beginning to sort out “real” and “pretend” will help you deal constructively with the stories that Jenny tells. You will realize that the stories aren’t lies but just her imagination at work.

Parents must also examine their own roles in problem situations. Do you expect too much of your children? Perhaps they are unable to do what you want. Have you stated your expectations clearly? Remember that children don’t understand language as well as adults. What behaviors do you model? Children imitate the behaviors of adults and older children around them. If you expect them to listen to you, do you listen to them? If you expect the truth from them, do you occasionally tell “white lies?” If you get upset when they hit each other, do you ever hit them? Perhaps a change in what you do will make a difference in their actions.

Negative and Positive Discipline

Negative methods of discipline include using shame or ridicule, employing harsh physical methods of discipline or threatening punishment. Positive methods of discipline utilize knowledge of how children develop and discipline strategies that teach children self-control. In the long run, positive strategies are more effective and more conducive to better relationships between parents and children.
Positive Discipline Strategies

Here are 10 ways to develop a positive discipline approach.

1. Treat children respectfully.
   Treat your children as you wish to be treated. For example, pointing out poor table manners at the family dinner table is embarrassing to children. Instead of learning polite behavior, children will be more likely to become resentful. They may also become belligerent if they did not anticipate. If Jeremy experiences a situation and the result of nagging or punished, they may have been trying to act responsibly and pour her own drink. A wise parent will recognize the child's attempt and approve of it, while encouraging him to clean up the mess. Too often, we assume children are "out to get us" when their goal was quite different.

2. Recognize the good intent.
   When children are small and still learning about the world and how it operates, they make mistakes and sometimes cause problems they did not anticipate. If Jeremy spills milk all over the table, he may have been trying to act responsibly and pour his own drink. A wise parent will recognize the child's attempt and approve of it, while encouraging him to clean up the mess. Too often, we assume children are "out to get us" when their goal was quite different.

3. Analyze the environment.
   Look around. Is there something that helped cause a problem that might be changed? Perhaps the latch on the gate needs to be fixed so Susan cannot escape the safety of the back yard. Perhaps the storage place for toys encourages Tommy to dump his toys in a messy heap instead of putting them away carefully.

4. Arrange for successful experiences.
   There is a saying that "nothing teaches like success." We feel good after winning a game or finishing a project. Children feel good, too, and begin to see themselves as capable and competent when they succeed. Arrange for them to successfully accomplish tasks to help avoid discipline problems. For example, we can 1) give toddlers finger foods so they can feed themselves, 2) give young children small amounts of food so they can finish it without being nagged or punished, 3) put training wheels on a bicycle so a four-year-old can ride it, 4) break larger tasks down into smaller steps. Emily can pour the water into the brownie mix and stir it when her father is baking, even though she is too young to bake all by herself. She and her father can enjoy this kitchen time together when he gives her jobs that she can succeed at, rather than pointing out that she can't bake brownies because she's too young.

Young children need adult help in completing large tasks and may need help for some time. Four-year-old Tommy, for example, will be able to successfully clean his room if mom or dad work with him to put things in order. When mom or dad helps, Tommy learns how to do the work, the work is completed in a reasonable length of time and both parent and child feel a sense of accomplishment.

5. Use consequences rather than punishment.
   Consequences can occur naturally or parents can structure them. An example of a structured consequence is denying a favorite television show because toys are not put away after several warnings. Or, instead of nagging your child to finish lunch, remove the uneaten food and don't allow more until afternoon snack time. The natural result of not finishing lunch is hunger pains an hour later. Ask yourself if your child will suffer any real harm from an hour or two of feeling hungry. The child's own inner discomfort is much more effective than your nagging to finish lunch. Remember that consequences should not be used as punishment.

6. Give directions in a positive way.
   "Keep the sand in the sandbox" tells what to do with the sand. "Watch what you do with the sand" is not enough information for a child. He or she can follow your directions and still dump sand on the grass or sidewalk, which probably isn't what you had in mind.

Decide exactly what you want your children to do before giving them directions. Tell them in simple words what you want. Keep in mind that young children cannot remember a long list of directions.

7. Use a minimum of rules.
   All children need rules or limits. They feel safe and secure in a world where they know what to expect. But young children cannot remember long lists of rules. Keep the number to a necessary few—concerning the health and safety of the child, the safety and respect of others and respect for property. Rules should be clear and reasonable so that children can understand and do what you request. Think about the rules in your family. Do they meet these criteria?

8. Follow through on the rules.
   If you set a limit or give an instruction to your children, be sure it's a necessary and sensible one and be prepared to follow through. Remember that children will test the limits to see just how firm they are and whether parents really mean what they say. A mother in the supermarket may say to her three-year-old, "Laura, don't touch the things in the shelves" and then go about her shopping, concentrating on the list in her hand.Laura, in the meantime, picks up another item to see what will happen. If nothing happens because mother didn't notice or doesn't say anything, Laura is confused. Did mom mean that or not? Laura will probably decide that mom really didn't mean it and keep on picking up...
things. Let your children know that you do follow through.

Laura's mother could have used the much more positive method of involving her in the shopping. She could have pointed out items she wanted and allowed Laura to take them off the shelf and put them in the basket to make the shopping trip interesting for Laura, teach her how to be helpful, head off discipline problems and help build a warm and loving relationship between parent and child.

9. **Prepare children for change.**
Give children a warning about changes in their life—from approaching bedtime to a visit from grandma next week—to allow them to finish their activities or prepare mentally for the change. They feel more in control if they're informed of the plans.
Many parents experience less resistance from their children if they say "In ten minutes it will be time to go," followed by "In five minutes, it will be time to go," and finally "Now it's time to go."

10. **Say yes whenever possible.**
Sometimes, children want something they cannot have at the moment. Instead of saying "No, John, you may not have a cookie," his mother says, "Yes, you may have a cookie right after lunch, for dessert." Then John knows that his wish is acceptable, but that the timing is wrong. Perhaps part of what a child wants is acceptable at the moment and part isn't. Refer to the acceptable part first, then the unacceptable: "You can open the package and see your new water toy now, but wait until bath time to put it in water."

Positive discipline helps you and your children work together rather than against each other. It preserves children's dignity and self-respect while teaching self-control, avoiding conflict situations and encouraging cooperative, positive and loving family relationships.

**Resources**

*(All of the resources listed below are available in libraries, bookstores or, in the case of Parents Magazine, through subscription.)*


Leach, Penelope. *Your Growing Child: From Babyhood Through Adolescence.* Alfred A. Knopf, 1986. (Originally published as *The Child Care Encyclopedia.*)


*Parents Magazine.* Published monthly and features articles about parenting, child growth and development, food and nutrition, discipline and special problems.

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ask questions, accept their occasional fears and remember that they are only 36 months old.

By four years, children are full of energy and exuberance and often think they are more capable than they really are. They love all kinds of words, including those that adults think are “bad.” However, children generally do not understand what the words mean. They are just beginning to understand the difference between real and pretend. Four’s enjoy being with other children and need playmates of the same age. They also need adults who can set and enforce appropriate limits without using harsh punishment.

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