

Behavior Training - Rules and Discipline Basics

Definition

- Children come into this world impulsive and undisciplined. When they start to walk, they begin to get into trouble. They do not develop much self-control until 3 years of age. They need to be taught safe and socially acceptable behavior.
- They need "behavior training" to learn good from bad behavior. They need universal rules and limit-setting to keep them from becoming a "spoiled" child.
- It's the parent's job to set limits. It's the child's job to object to and test them.
- "To discipline" means "to teach." It means giving constructive feedback. It does not mean "to punish." You will be your child's teacher and coach for many years. It's an important part of a parent's job.
- Age: Most of this information is about children less than 5 years old: toddlers and preschoolers.

Health Information

How to Use this Parent Handout on Behavior Training:

- If your child has several discipline problems or is out of control, go to the section: *Behavior Training: How to Design a Plan for Your Child*.
- If you mainly want to learn about Rules, go to the section: *Rules: Guidelines for How to Create and Use Them*.
- If you mainly want to learn about Consequences (Negative Feedback), go to the separate handout: **Behavior Training: Consequences**. It contains the following 2 sections: *Consequences: Menu of Options* and *Consequences: Guidelines for How to Give*.
- Don't overlook the last section: *Positive Feedback for Desired Behavior: Guidelines for How to Give*.

What to Expect

- Any inappropriate behavior can be changed. In young children, most single problem behaviors will improve in 2 to 4 weeks with a targeted plan.
- Behavior training (discipline techniques) gradually changes a self-centered toddler into a mature teen who is thoughtful and respectful of others, assertive without being aggressive, and in control of his or her impulses.

Care Advice

Behavior Training: How to Design a Plan for Your Child

1. List Your Child's Problem Behaviors (Misbehaviors):

- What do you want to change?
- Over the next 3 days, observe your child carefully. Write down your child's most inappropriate or annoying behaviors. We will call these his misbehaviors. You may sometimes call them his bad behaviors.

2. **Set Priorities for the Misbehaviors You Want to Correct First:**
 - Some misbehavior needs immediate attention (such as behavior that might harm your child or others).
 - The first goal of discipline is to protect your child from danger (safety training).
 - The second goal is to protect others. (no aggression training).
 - The third goal is to address behaviors that are too disruptive to be ignored (such as, refusing to go to bed).
 - Some families with a child who is out of control have too many rules. Setting priorities and letting go of the small stuff is important here.
3. **Write House Rules for the Most Important Kinds of Misbehavior:**
 - For help, see the section titled *Rules: Guidelines for How to Create Them*.
 - Choose your rules (limits) carefully. They should be important and non-negotiable.
4. **Decide What Consequence You Will Use for Each Rule If Broken:**
 - All behavior, good and bad, is mainly changed (or shaped) by consequences. If the consequence is pleasant (getting what they want or a reward), the child is more likely to repeat that behavior. If the consequence is unpleasant (negative feedback or a punishment), the child is less likely to do the same thing again.
 - Young children do not respond to lectures or reminders. Actions speak louder than words. The most effective actions are ignoring harmless misbehavior, redirecting the child to appropriate behavior, or giving your child a time-out.
 - For help, see the separate handoutm Behavior Training: Consequences.
5. **Stop Any Yelling:**
 - Yelling teaches your child to yell back. Yelling matches also can escalate into a verbal battle (called playing "uproar"). We know the emotional brain turns on fast and the thinking brain takes a bit longer. So if you start to yell, try to stop until you gain control of your emotions.
 - Your child will respond better to a calm voice and an appropriate consequence. The adult has to downshift first.
6. **Stop Any Physical Punishment:**
 - Most out-of-control children are already too aggressive.
 - Physical punishment (such as slapping the hand or spanking) teaches them that it's okay to be aggressive (such as hit or attack someone) to solve problems.
7. **Try to Avoid Public Places Until Misbehavior is Under Control at Home:**
 - Misbehaving children are usually more difficult to control in a shopping mall or supermarket than at home. Leave your child with a sitter or partner when you need to go to these places.
8. **Try to Take Daily Breaks from Your Child:**
 - Tell your partner when you need a break from supervising your young child. Ask then to take over all behavior training for a few hours.
 - If this is impossible, hire a teenager a few times a week to look after your child while you go out.
 - Also make a "date" for a weekly night out with your partner or a friend.
9. **Give Your Child More Positive Feedback:**
 - Children want to please and respond to discipline best when they feel loved. Every child needs lots of daily praise, smiles, and hugs.
 - Give your child this increased attention when he or she is not demanding it. Try hard to notice the times when your child is being good. If your child receives more negative criticism each day than positive responses, you need to restore a healthy emotional balance. It comes back to setting priorities. Have less rules, less criticism and more praise. Many experts feel that it takes 10 positive interactions to counter one negative interaction.
 - For help, see the section titled *Positive Feedback for Desired Behavior: Guidelines for How to Give*.

10. **Protect Your Child's Self-Esteem:**

- Remember that you are trying to change a bad behavior, but in a good child. Your child needs to know that he's a "great kid" and that you love him dearly.
- Don't discuss your child's behavior problems with other people when your child is around.
- Correct your child in a kind way. Sometimes begin your correction with "I'm sorry I can't let you..."
- Don't label your child a "bad boy."
- After any punishment is over, welcome your child back into the family circle. Give him a clean slate.

Rules: Guidelines for How to Create and Use Them

1. **Begin Behavior Training at about 12 Months of Age**

- The first year is mainly about nurturing and protecting your baby.
- The earliest rules are for your child's safety.
- When children start to crawl, they may need an occasional No.
- When they start to walk, limits are always needed.

2. **State Each Unacceptable Behavior as a Clear and Brief Rule:**

- The younger the child, the more concrete the rule must be. Examples of clear rules are: "No pinching", "No throwing toys" and "No running".
- When possible, give a brief reason for the rule: "Hitting hurts" or "Your toy can break".

3. **State the Acceptable and Desired Behavior:**

- Your child needs to know what is expected of him or her. Examples are: "Play with your brother," "Look at books when I'm on the telephone," or "Walk, don't run."
- When praising any good behavior, make it specific. For example, "Thank you for being quiet."

4. **Ignore Harmless Misbehavior:**

- The more rules you have, the less likely your child will obey them. Constant criticism doesn't work.
- Ignore unimportant behavior such as giving bad looks, not sitting still, poor table manners, backtalk, or interrupting people. These are near normal during the early years.

5. **Use Rules that are Fair and Attainable:**

- Rules must fit your child's age.
- A child should not be punished for clumsiness when he or she is learning to walk. Same for poor enunciation when the child is learning to speak. In addition, a child should not be punished for behavior that is part of normal emotional development, such as thumb-sucking, fears of being separated from their parents, and toilet training accidents.

6. **Concentrate on Two or Three Rules at the Start:**

- Give highest priority to issues of safety, such as not running into the street.
- Next, address preventing harm to others.
- Then, address behavior that damages property.
- Only then go to all the annoying misbehaviors that wear you down.

7. **Avoid Trying to Change "No-Win" Power Struggles Through More Pressure:**

- "No-win behavior" is behavior that usually cannot be controlled by the parent if the child decides to continue it. Examples are wetting pants, hair pulling, thumb sucking, body rocking, masturbation, not eating enough, not going to sleep, and refusal to complete schoolwork.
- The first step in resolving such a power struggle is to withdraw from the conflict and stop punishing your child for the misbehavior.
- Then switch to positive feedback and incentives, when he behaves as you'd like.
- For help, see the section titled *Positive Feedback for Desired Behavior: Guidelines for How to Give*.

8. **Apply Your Rules Consistently:**

- After parents agree on the rules, it's helpful to write them down. Then post them in a conspicuous place in the home to remind you of your game plan.

Positive Feedback for Desired Behavior: Guidelines for How to Give

1. **Give Your Child Lots of Hugs When Being Good:**

- Some parents don't give enough verbal approval and physical affection (hugs and human touch).
- Don't take good behavior for granted. Watch for behavior you like, then praise your child by saying such things as "I like the way you..." or "I appreciate..." When you say this, move close to your child, get eye contact, smile, and be affectionate.
- A parent's affection and attention is the favorite reward of most children.

2. **Social Reinforcers for Good Behavior:**

- There are two kinds of positive reinforcers; social and material.
- Social reinforcers, such as praise, are used to encourage desired behavior. Praise the behavior, not the person.
- Preface your praise with "Good job, I'm so proud of the way you". Examples are sharing toys, taking turns, being kind, doing chores, making the baby laugh, petting the dog gently, being a good sport, cleaning up, or reading a book.
- Your child can also be praised for trying. Examples are trying to use the potty or attempting something difficult, like a puzzle.
- Praise will make your child want to behave appropriately more often. Try to "catch your child being good".

3. **Material Reinforcers for Good Behavior:**

- Material reinforcers (incentives) are often candy, animal crackers, money, or video-time.
- Incentives often need to be added to overcome resistance when children are entrenched in a power struggle around a "no-win" behavior. Examples are deliberately wetting or soiling their pants.
- Incentives should be used for one problem behavior at a time and when praise alone has failed.
- They should be phased out and replaced by natural (social) reinforcers as soon as possible.

Call Your Doctor If

- Your child's misbehavior is dangerous
- Your child is also having behavior problems at preschool
- Your child can't keep friends
- Parents can't agree on behavior training plan (your rules and consequences)
- Parent can't give up physical punishment
- Misbehavior is not improved after using this plan for 4 weeks
- You have other questions or concerns

Pediatric Care Advice

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