



**RALEIGH
PEDIATRIC
ASSOCIATES**

Toddler Behavior Management

Discipline often carries the notion of punishment to some people. However, the dictionary defines discipline as training or education in proper conduct and behavior. A common problem for some parents is confusion about their leadership role in providing guidance or discipline. Love is not enough. It is our responsibility as parents to teach (discipline) children acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Research tells us that healthy, balanced children come from homes where there are firm rules which are consistently enforced, and where there are high standards for behavior and performance which children are expected to live up to.

Resistance to authority is an expected part of growing up. It is normal for children to exert manipulative pressures on their parents. They learn quickly that if they behave in a way that is distasteful to adults, often the adults will give in to what the child wants rather than insisting on what the parent thinks is best. Children often first whine. If that doesn't get what they want, they cling and cry, scream, and may even throw a tantrum. It is important to recognize this behavior for what it is. Giving in to this manipulative behavior rewards the "misbehavior," reinforces it, and the child will continue to misbehave.

Psychologists tell us that the reward principle is the foundation of much of what we know about human behavior. Rewards may be material rewards or social rewards like attention, smiles, and hugs. (They have in common that they are good consequences.) When children's behavior is analyzed, one notes that they continue doing things which are followed by good consequences or good feelings (rewards) and they tend to stop doing things which are followed by bad consequences, bad feelings, or no rewards. One way to eliminate undesirable behavior is to consistently and permanently ignore it. Never reward it, even with attention. Behavior which is not followed by any kind of reward eventually drops out. It is hard to ignore misbehavior. It takes concerted effort, but if one perseveres, it works. Some situations, of course, cannot be ignored. For instance, when children might harm themselves, harm others, or harm property. Nevertheless, there are many day-to-day situations with children that are best ignored.

We have many parents who worry about spoiling their children. Many seem to equate it with too much love or affection. You cannot love your children too much. The way to "spoil" a child is to reward undesirable behavior. Rewarding bad behavior by repeatedly giving in or being permissive teaches a child to behave badly. Social rewards are not given for all behavior, just behavior you like and want to continue.

Strong warnings, ultimatums, or threats work immediately and are another effective way to stop undesirable behavior. It is rewarding to experience a sense of relief when we avoid or escape something unpleasant. We are not necessarily recommending parents to use warnings or threats as the "best way" to get children to obey. Nevertheless, in the real world there are times when parents have to have obedience from their children and may need to give an ultimatum. If you use an ultimatum, back it up. Make it clear what is expected, how soon, and what will happen if the child does not comply. Make the consequence immediate. Never give an ultimatum that you cannot or will not carry out.

What about punishment? We certainly think there is a place for punishment. Punishment is a way of stopping behavior that you cannot ignore. Punishment also influences behavior--and fast: that is why it has been around for as long as humanity. Punishment might be defined as applying an unpleasant consequence following a behavior.

Punishment alone has some undesirable aspects. It does not teach a new correct behavior and it does not build good feelings between people. You cannot separate the pain, either physical or social, for the persons who administer it. When punishment is to be used, ideally it should be clearly related to the behavior, given immediately, of low to moderate intensity, and certain to occur.

Many parents ask about physical punishment. We think it has its place in certain situations. Certainly a pop on the hand can be effective in teaching a very young child to stop playing with an electrical outlet. Another effective punishment is "time out." When using time out, the following points are important.

1. Pick a boring place
2. Keep the time relatively short
3. Do not allow any talking
4. Parents decide when the time is up
5. Do not debate, discuss, or argue

Punishment has its place in stopping behavior that cannot be ignored or tolerated, but it is the least desirable because it is associated only with bad feelings. In guiding your child's behavior, it is most desirable to:

1. Reward their good behavior
2. Ignore their bad behavior
3. Give a warning
4. Place a child in "time out"
5. Punish

If is preferable that parents have a positive focus, actively look for good behavior in their children and reward it. In other words, catch them when they are good as well as catch them when they are bad. Some people say, "Why praise someone for doing what they are supposed to do?" What are the alternatives? If you ignore the good behavior, it is likely to go away. If you punish only the bad behavior, then you are always being negative and there are no new good feelings. Consistency is another important aspect of teaching. It is important that the parents be consistent between themselves and consistent day to day. A mother cannot teach her little boy not to throw a ball in the house if dad comes home and encourages a game of catch in the living room. Children's behavior is also learned by imitating people around them, particularly their parents. Parents must set the example they want their children to follow.

Considerable time and effort is needed to teach children how to behave in ways that are acceptable within the family and within society. Relax, nobody is perfect. Do not get discouraged. None of us do the right thing all the time.

Reading list:

1. Surviving With Kids – Bartz and Rasor
2. The Hurried Child – David Elkind
3. A Good Enough Parent – Bruno Bettelheim
4. Your child's Self-Esteem – Dorothy C. Briggs

BEHAVIOR PRINCIPLES

- We keep doing things which are followed by good consequences (rewards).
- Ideal timing for rewarding a child is immediately following the desired behavior. The longer the delay between the desired behavior and the reward, the less effect will be upon learning.
- Because each person is unique, rewards must also be unique-- that is, “tailor made” to fit the individual.
- We like material rewards such as money, food, or toys, but it is really social rewards like attention, praise, and affection that make us feel good about ourselves.
- Attention is one of the most powerful social rewards, for both desirable and undesirable behavior. Even scolding a child is paying attention and may be rewarding.
- We stop doing things which are followed by bad consequences, bad feelings, or no rewards.
- One way to eliminate undesirable behavior is to consistently and permanently ignore it. Never reward it--even with attention.
- Parents need not worry about giving too much love and attention. The way to “spoil” a child is to reward undesirable behavior.
- It is rewarding to experience a sense of relief when we avoid or escape something unpleasant.
- If you use an ultimatum, back it up. Make it clear what is expected, how soon, and what will happen if the child does not comply. Make the consequences immediate. Never give an ultimatum you do not intend to carry out!
- Punishment is a way of stopping undesirable behavior that cannot be ignored. If punishment is used, it must be immediate, related to the behavior, or low to moderate intensity, and certain to occur.

- When using “time out” as punishment:
 - Pick a boring place
 - Keep the time relatively short
 - Do not allow any talking
 - Parents decide when the time is up
 - Do not discuss, debate, or argue.
- It is important that approval or disapproval of behavior be consistent and be made clear to the child.
- Preferred ways to guide behavior:
 - Reward good behavior
 - Ignore undesirable behavior
 - Give a warning
 - Place the child in “time out”
 - Punish
- All members of the family should be involved in changing a child’s behavior.
- Considerable time and effort are needed for behavior change. Each of us has spent a lifetime learning how to become the way we are. One should not expect people to change overnight.