
Ideas for Parents

How to Discipline Without Spanking

All children can be frustrating at times, driving even the most good-natured parent to angry words and threats. And when children continue to misbehave, it's easy to resort to physical punishment to correct them. While discipline is essential to child rearing, many parents observe that spanking children is ineffective and fails to teach kids appropriate behaviour.

Spanking has physical dangers as well. Whether you use your hand, a stick, or a strap, you can easily bruise a small child or fracture a bone with a light blow. A cuff on the head can burst an eardrum; a "good shaking" can rattle the brain causing a concussion or even death.

Discipline problems often arise when young children are confined to unsuitable spaces, such as rooms with "adult" furniture and equipment, or potential hazards. Scolding youngsters makes them tense and hyperactive and creates stress for those who are supervising. A suitable play space can make life a lot easier for everyone.

Setting limits

The goal of discipline is to teach self-control, but until children are old enough to set limits for themselves, parents must do it for them. When telling a child what she or he can or cannot do, be clear and firm. Statements such as, "Use the crayons only on the paper," or "Don't hit the dog," leave no room for doubt. But ambiguous words such as: "You may splash a little but not too much," are confusing and invite trouble.

Once you've made a rule, apply it consistently. Behaviour that is unacceptable one day cannot be permissible the next because you are too busy to deal with it at the time.

When you want to stop what a child is doing, action works better than words. Distract her or him with an alternate game or activity that is fun, or move the child to another spot. While you are doing this, briefly say why it is necessary. Act confidently; hesitation and lengthy explanations are a challenge to children and invoke a battle of wills.

How to state limits

- Recognize your child's wish by repeating it simply. "I understand that you'd like to watch TV."
- State the limit gently but firmly: "But it's bedtime now."
- Provide an alternative: "I'll read you a story," or "You can watch TV tomorrow."

If the child is resentful or angry, help her or him to express it: "You wish you could stay up longer," or "You wish you were bigger and there were no bedtime rules."

When rules are broken

If you set limits clearly and confidently, children will usually conform. When they break a rule (and all children do occasionally) hold your ground and avoid being dragged into arguments or becoming defensive. The strength you convey is reassuring and helps children learn to curb their impulses.

Tips to help you stay cool

- Rather than resort to shouting or hitting, use your strength and size to diffuse trouble. A child who won't come out of a bath can be lifted. A child who won't walk can be carried. A child who hits can be held and told "NO."
- Avoid joining into tantrums: turn your back or walk away. Don't talk until the tantrum ends and then, don't mention it. If you're in public and embarrassed, carry the child to a private spot or the car. Do not give into tantrums unless you want your child to learn that they sometimes work.
- When a child is being silly – teasing, provoking, and refusing to listen – don't waste energy on shouts that could end in a slap. Crouch down, grasp him or her by the upper arms so she or he cannot avoid looking at you, and then talk.

Remember, preventing misbehavior reduces the necessity for punishment.

With notes from Nanci Burns, a mental health worker with the Ottawa Board of Education.

Source: The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.