Teaching Discipline

Teaching a child discipline is an important responsibility of any parent or guardian. With discipline, a child will grow to have self-control.

When teaching discipline, it is important to understand what discipline is and what it is not. Discipline is a learning experience. You are teaching children to do the right thing and helping them understand the difference between behaviors that are appropriate and behaviors that are not. The goal is to develop self-control—to get children to do the right thing on their own, even when they think they can get away with bad behavior.

Discipline is not punishment. Punishment is simply a penalty. While punishment may get children to obey out of fear, it does not, by itself, do a good job of teaching them to use self-control and choose right from wrong on their own.

As anyone who has tried it knows, teaching discipline is not always easy. Children between the ages of 18 months and 24 months are a particularly challenging group because they are still acting on impulse and struggling to control their actions. Foster children may have additional issues that make teaching discipline challenging, particularly if the child has experienced serious abuse and/or neglect. In such situations, you may want to choose those behaviors that are most important to work on first.

Regardless of the age or stage, you and your child will probably become frustrated at times. But with time, patience, consistency, and a little knowledge about teaching discipline, you will help your child gain self-control and respect for others.

Tips for teaching discipline

The following tips will make teaching discipline a little easier.

Set and explain rules and consequences
First things first: Children must understand which behaviors are expected and which are unacceptable. It is your job to explain the rules and the consequences in a way that your child can understand them.

- Keep it simple and clear. Use language your child understands. This will depend on the child's age and developmental stage. A long, involved lecture to a toddler too young to understand it will fail, and the inappropriate behavior will continue.
- Don't change a rule or consequence when your child violates it. Children may try to talk their way out of having to accept the consequences of their
behavior. Enforce the rule as it stands. Later, you can talk about changing it.

- Enforce consequences immediately. Be sure your child understands that the consequence is connected to the bad behavior and why that behavior is not appropriate. But never punish for a behavior the two of you have not discussed.
- Keep in mind that certain methods of discipline must change as the child grows older. What works when a child is 3 years old may not work at age 5.

Be consistent, firm, and understanding

- Children won’t understand the difference between what is appropriate behavior and what is not if parents or guardians are not consistent about how they expect them to behave.
- When there are two parents or guardians in a child’s life, it is important that they are consistent about consequences and what is or is not appropriate behavior.
- Children must understand that you will be firm about rules and consequences.
- Children may misbehave because they are upset or angry. Stop the behavior, then talk to your children. Ask your children to explain their feelings. Say you understand, but there is no excuse for misbehaving.

Give warnings and make suggestions

Even the most obedient child needs to be reminded from time to time about rules.

- Give a young child a warning. “The next time you throw the ball at the wall, you will have to put it away.” This provides a second chance to succeed.
- The goal is for children to learn how to behave appropriately on their own. Suggest how that can be done. For example, show your child how to have fun throwing the ball into a basket or bucket rather than at the wall.

Use praise and rewards

Praise and rewards work. They focus on the positive and steer the child toward good behavior. But it is important to understand the difference between rewarding and bribing.

- Rewards should be related to something a child enjoys, such as allowing more television time. Reward a child after special accomplishments or special behavior.
- A bribe consists of promising a reward in advance for not doing something your child shouldn’t do in the first place. For example, “If you don’t hit your brother, I will give you a cookie.” Do not bribe.

Use a time-out for serious misbehavior

For serious misbehavior, try giving your child a time-out.

- A time-out is having your child sit in an isolated place with nothing to do for a short time. The rule of thumb is one minute of time-out per each year of age. For example, two minutes for a 2-year-old child.
- A time-out replaces spanking.
- Explain to your children why they are getting a time-out and why the behavior was not acceptable.
- Sit your child in a chair, then go about your business. Leave your child alone in time-out, but stay close enough to watch. Keep the child away from toys, TV, etc.
- If your child gets up before the time is up, explain that this is not allowed and that you must add one more minute to the time-out. That’s the rule.
- When time-out ends, remind your children why it was given and allow them to leave. Then, help your children do what they should have done in the first place, and praise that behavior.

Don’t use physical punishment

- Physical punishment such as hitting or spanking sends the wrong message. You want to teach appropriate behavior. Children who are often hit or spanked at home when a parent is upset may later hit someone who upsets them.
- Hitting or spanking won’t help to encourage better behavior.
- Children 5 and older who are often spanked or hit often tend to follow the rules out of fear and don’t learn why a behavior is acceptable or not acceptable. Also, they may behave when you are around but not behave when you are away.

Always lead by example

- Always practice what you preach. If the rule is to finish dinner before leaving the table, make sure you follow it, too. If you don’t, your children will be confused about why the rule applies to them but not to you.
- Reward good behavior.