

Disciplining Your Child

Whatever the age of your child, it's important to be consistent when it comes to discipline. If parents don't stick to the rules and consequences they set up, their kids aren't likely to either.

Ages 0 to 2

Babies and toddlers are naturally curious so it's wise to eliminate temptations from their reach. When your crawling baby or roving toddler heads toward an unacceptable or dangerous play object, calmly say "No" and either remove your child from the area or distract him with an appropriate activity.

Timeouts can be effective discipline for toddlers. A child who has been hitting or biting should be told why the behavior is unacceptable and taken to a designated timeout area like a kitchen chair or bottom stair for a minute or two to calm down (longer timeouts are not effective for toddlers).

It's important to not spank, hit or slap a child of any age. Babies and toddlers are especially unlikely to be able to make any connection between their behavior and physical punishment. They will only feel the pain of the hit. Spanking teaches kids that it's OK to hit when they're angry.

Kids learn by watching adults, particularly their parents. Make sure your behavior is role-model material. You'll make a much stronger impression by putting your own belongings away rather than just issuing orders to your child to pick up toys while your stuff is left strewn around.

Ages 3 to 5

Explain to kids what you expect of them **before** you punish them for a certain behavior. For instance, the first time your 3-year-old uses crayons to decorate the living room wall, discuss why that's not allowed and what will happen if your child does it again (for instance, your child will have to help clean the wall). If the wall gets decorated again a few days later, issue a reminder that crayons are for paper only and then enforce the consequences.

The earlier that parents establish this kind of "I set the rules and you're expected to listen or accept the consequences" standard, the better for everyone. Although it's sometimes easier for parents to ignore occasional bad behavior or not follow through on some threatened punishment, this sets a bad precedent. Empty threats undermine your authority as a parent, and make it more likely that kids will test limits. Consistency is the key to effective discipline, and it's important for parents to decide what the rules are and then uphold them.

Don't forget to reward good behaviors. Don't underestimate the positive effect that praise can have because discipline is not just about punishment but also about recognizing good behavior. For example, saying "I'm proud of you for sharing your toys at playgroup" is usually more effective than punishing a child for not sharing. And be specific when doling out praise; don't just say, "Good job!"

If your child continues an unacceptable behavior no matter what you do, try making a chart with a box for each day of the week. Decide how many times your child can misbehave before a punishment kicks in or how long the proper behavior must be displayed before it is rewarded. Rewards and consequences should be given on a daily basis. Long-term consequences have little effect.

Timeouts also can work well for kids at this age. Establish a suitable timeout place that's free of distractions and will force your child to think about how he has behaved. Remember, getting sent to your room isn't effective if a computer, TV, or games are there. Also, a timeout is time away from any type of reinforcement. So your child shouldn't get any attention from you while in a timeout — including talking, eye contact, etc. Experts say 1 minute for each year of age is a good rule of thumb; others recommend using the timeout until the child is calmed down (to teach self-regulation).

It's important to tell kids what the right thing to do is, not just to say what the wrong thing is. For example, instead of saying "Don't jump on the couch," try "Please sit on the furniture and put your feet on the floor."

Ages 6 to 8

Timeouts and consequences are also effective discipline strategies for this age group.

Again, consistency is crucial, as is follow-through. Make good on any promises of discipline or else you risk undermining your authority. Kids have to believe that you mean what you say. This is not to say you can't give second chances or allow a certain margin of error, but for the most part, you should act on what you say.

Be careful not to make unrealistic threats of punishment ("Slam that door and you'll never watch TV again!") in anger, since not following through could weaken **all** your threats. If you threaten to turn the car around and go home if the squabbling in the backseat doesn't stop, make sure you do exactly that.

Huge punishments may take away your power as a parent. If you ground your son for a month, your child may

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not feel motivated to change behaviors because everything has already been taken away.

Ages 9 to 12

Kids in this age group, just as with all ages, can be disciplined with natural consequences. As they mature and request more independence and responsibility, teaching them to deal with the consequences of their behavior is an effective and appropriate method of discipline.

For example, if your fifth grader's homework isn't done before bedtime, should you make him stay up to do it or even lend a hand yourself? Probably not because you'll miss an opportunity to teach a key life lesson. If homework is incomplete, your child will go to school the next day without it and suffer the resulting bad grade.

It's natural for parents to want to rescue kids from mistakes, but in the long run they do kids a favor by letting them fail sometimes.

Ages 13 and up

Set up rules regarding homework, visits by friends, curfews and dating and discuss them beforehand with your teenager so there will be no misunderstandings. When your teen **does** break a rule, taking away privileges may seem the best plan of action. While it's fine to take away the car for a week, for example, be sure to also discuss why coming home an hour past curfew is unacceptable and worrisome.

Remember to give a teenager some control over things. Not only will this limit the number of power struggles you have, it will help your teen respect the decisions that you do need to make.

It's also important to focus on the positives. For example, have your teen earn a later curfew by demonstrating positive behavior instead of setting an earlier curfew as punishment for irresponsible behavior.