

# Discipline—The Basics

Effective discipline is based on a positive, supportive relationship between parents and children. Strategies based on praising and rewarding desired behaviors and removing privileges are generally better than strategies based on punishment. For young children, “time-outs” are a useful strategy. Most pediatricians don’t recommend spanking because other approaches seem to work better.

## How should I discipline my children?

There’s no “right” way to discipline children; every family must find an approach that works for them. However, some key concepts can help you develop an effective approach to teaching children proper behavior.

The approach to discipline should be consistent for all children in your family, with limits set and enforced for all. Both parents, as well as other care providers, should be consistent in disciplining children.

It’s important to consider your child’s developmental level in setting expectations and responding to behavior problems. For example, it would be normal for a one-year-old to play with the family stereo, possibly causing damage. An appropriate response would be to distract the child and put the stereo out of reach.

The family atmosphere should be a safe, loving, and supportive one for your child. It is also very important for parents to be good role models. Show the kind of behavior you would like your child to follow—children learn from their parents!

## What are the principles of discipline?

“Positive reinforcement” means praising and rewarding desired behaviors. This is more effective than “negative reinforcement”—yelling or punishment for undesired behaviors.

When punishment is necessary, “time-outs” are a good tool to use with young children. By age 5, children are old enough to understand the consequences of their behavior. Strategies based on removing privileges are recommended for this age group.

- **Time-outs.** For toddlers and preschoolers, the idea behind time-outs is to remove the child from playtime or other desired activities as a direct consequence of undesired behavior.
- Tell your child you are giving him or her a time-out. During the time-out, your child must sit by himself or herself away from play or other activities.


- Especially for toddlers, the time-out should happen immediately after the undesired behavior. Two-year-olds can’t make the connection between misbehaving earlier in the day and the time-out they are getting later.
- Time-outs shouldn’t last too long: 1 minute per year of age is a good guideline. Stay calm and don’t argue or bargain with your child.
- Time-outs only work when they are used consistently. If you are just starting to use time-outs, at first your toddler may respond by having a tantrum. *When tantrums happen, ignore them if possible, and remove the child from the situation if necessary.* Don’t give in to tantrums, or you will reinforce that behavior. Your child will learn that he will get what he wants eventually. Parents who stick with it usually find time-outs effective in reducing undesired behaviors.
- **Removing privileges.** After age 4 or 5, children are old enough to understand why they are being disciplined.
- Taking away some privilege or activity that your child really wants provides consequences for misbehavior. For younger children, this may mean taking away TV or video game privileges. Older children may be “grounded” (not allowed to go out with friends). Teens may have their driving privileges taken away.
- Be clear, direct, and consistent each time the undesired behavior occurs. Be calm when discussing the misbehavior with your child. If you can’t stay calm, it may be best to discuss the problem later.

## What discipline strategies are less effective?

- **Negative verbal statements.** If used infrequently, negative verbal statements can be helpful in pointing out misbehavior. However, if used often, negative comments and criticisms become less effective; they can actually be a way of giving the child attention. Negative statements should refer to the behavior (“What you did was wrong because...”), not the child’s character (“You’re a bad boy.”).
- **Spanking.** Although spanking is not necessarily bad, most pediatricians think other strategies are more effective. Parents who were spanked while growing up are more likely to spank their own children.
- Spanking is defined as hitting a child with an open hand on the buttocks, arm, or leg without causing physical harm. Even when used correctly, spanking is not as effective as the other methods discussed.
- Any other type of physical punishment is *not* spanking. This includes hitting a child in anger; hitting hard; hitting with a fist or object; kicking; hitting hard

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enough to leave a mark; or pulling hair, jerking arms, or shaking a child. All of these types of hitting could injure a child. They also show him or her that aggressive, angry behavior is an OK way to solve problems.

 If you ever feel so angry that you might hurt a child, remove yourself from the situation. Leave the room and try to calm down, or call your spouse or a friend.

### When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- The methods of discipline you are using do not seem to be working.
- You are getting very frustrated with your child and feel like you might harm him or her.