

Discipline (0 – 12 years)



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People often confuse ‘discipline’ with ‘physical punishment’ but they are quite different. Discipline is about guiding children and helping them learn what is expected. They gradually learn how to control their own behaviour.

You don’t need to physically punish children to teach them. They learn best when ‘good’ behaviour is encouraged and they feel safe and secure. The key is having a close relationship with your child as well as clear rules and realistic expectations.

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What is discipline?

For many parents growing up, discipline often meant punishment. It could leave us feeling hurt, upset and unfairly treated.

Discipline is really about guidance. It is a way to keep children safe as they find out about the world. They need to learn how to manage their feelings, impulses and actions so they can learn and get on with others.

Discipline is also about helping children learn the values that are important to your family. Children learn to make good choices because they want to do the right thing, not just to avoid punishment. This teaches them self-discipline.

Warm but firm parenting that encourages the behaviour you want is the best way to guide children. A positive approach is less stressful for children and makes parenting more enjoyable. It takes patience but is worth it in the long run. It uses love instead of fear to teach life-long skills, and strengthens the bond with your child.

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Children learn best when parenting is warm but firm. It builds on your child’s strong desire to please you.

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Understanding children’s behaviour

Young children often show their feelings in how they behave. They have not yet learned the words to say how they feel.

Parents might think the child is being ‘naughty’ or playing up when in fact they are struggling with something.

Understanding what causes your child’s behaviour is important. If you deal with what’s really bothering them they will have less need to ‘act out’ or be ‘naughty’.

When life is so busy it’s easy to think you don’t have the time to find out what is really going on. However the time spent finding out the real cause of your child’s behaviour will mean less time reacting to ‘misbehaviour’.

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When a child is ‘naughty’ it can be a sign they haven’t yet learnt what you expect, or they have feelings they don’t know how to deal with.

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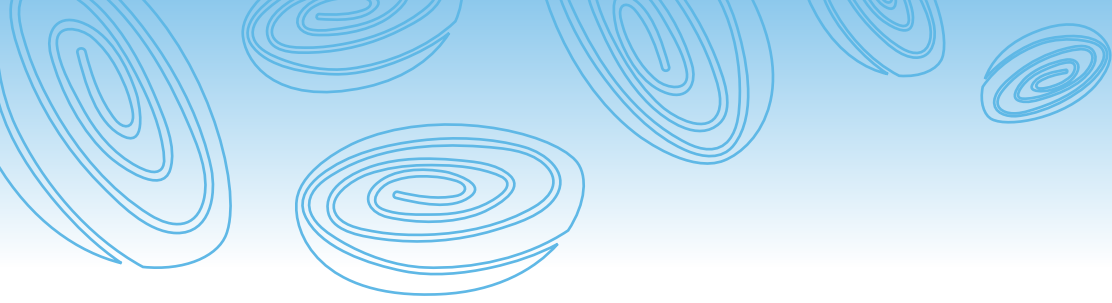
Learning what is expected

Children are not born knowing how to behave. They rely on you to teach and guide them in ways that suit their understanding and ability. They need you to show them what to do calmly and patiently. Just as we all learn by practice, you may need to repeat a lesson many times until they can do it without your help.

Dealing with feelings

Children can have many different feelings in a short space of time. Expressing emotions is a normal part of their development – it is not ‘misbehaviour’.

The younger the child, the harder it is for them to know their feelings or to have the words to tell you. Their brain can’t yet stay calm when they have big feelings such as frustration, anger or disappointment. They can feel overwhelmed and out of control. They learn best when you remain calm as you guide them through this.



Try to find out what your child is feeling by really listening and helping them talk about it. You might say:

- ‘You seem very angry. Can you tell me what’s wrong?’
- ‘I think you must be hurting inside’
- ‘Tell me if you need a hug.’

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Just like adults, children need to be heard and understood when they are upset.

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Help children name their feelings. When a child is supported to express a feeling safely, they learn that all feelings are OK and that you will keep loving them, even when they’re upset. They also learn that feelings are not something to be avoided or ignored.

Beneath the upset feelings it could be that your child:

- feels insecure, e.g. a new baby in the family, problems at school, trying to make friends, scared by parents fighting or a family break up
- feels ignored because you are always busy. They act out to get your attention because angry attention is better than none
- is trying to cope with changes and it all feels too much
- is angry and frustrated at not being able to do something
- is showing that they feel unfairly treated
- needs more support or more independence than you have allowed. Maybe your parenting style is too strict or too relaxed.

Wanting to please you

Sometimes when a child feels controlled or forced to do what a parent wants a lot of the time, they can start to resist and a power struggle can result. They might get angry and frustrated if they think you don’t listen, or you don’t care what they are feeling. This can affect the bond and trust you have with your child.

It will be hard to get your child to cooperate if they have given up trying to please you. Going back to basics and reconnecting with your child is the most important thing you can do. It can help to:

- spend time with them, playing and having fun
- focus on their ‘good’ behaviour rather than only reacting to ‘bad’ behaviour
- show that you understand how they feel when they are upset
- find positive ways to say things rather than using ‘No’ or ‘Don’t’ all the time, e.g. rather than ‘Sit up straight’ or ‘Don’t slouch’ you might say ‘When you sit up straight in the chair your back grows nice and strong’
- tell them what you like about them and how much you love them.

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The easier you make it for your child to please you, the more they will want to do so.

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Every child is different

Each child is unique and every situation is different. The way you parent and help each child to learn will depend on their age, ability and temperament.

Strong-willed children

Some children will do what you expect with very little stress while others are very strong-willed and determined. It might seem they are stubborn, but strong-willed children like to be involved and feel capable. They like to do things for themselves.

Some parents think they need to stop their child being strong-willed to get them to behave, but helping them feel in control works best. If you enter into a power struggle with your strong-willed child, family life can become a battle-ground. When you feel a power struggle brewing it can help if you:

- stay calm
- don’t take their resistance personally. They’re just struggling with wanting to feel in control of their world
- let them know you understand how they feel. It will help calm them down. It also teaches them they can cope with feelings without needing to be cheered up, even when they don’t get what they want
- try to see things from their point of view. Whatever viewpoint your child has, they are strongly attached to it. Pushing them to do something without understanding



why they are resisting may end up in a struggle. You might say 'I can hear you don't want to wear your coat to the shops. Can you tell me more about why?' When they feel listened to, they can be more flexible. Even if they don't feel cold now, they may be happy to put a coat in the car in case they feel cold later

- find ways that you can both win. If turning the TV off isn't a choice, you might say 'We need to turn the TV off in five minutes. Do you want to turn it off yourself, or would you like me to do it?' You still get to decide what happens, but giving your child a choice about how it happens means you both win
- use routines and rules. If the rule is 'we brush our teeth before bed', the child doesn't need to resist the parent's wishes in order to feel in control, it is just a house rule that everyone follows.

Children with a disability

Children with a disability need guidance too. Depending on the nature of the disability it can take longer for them to learn. You may have to break things down into smaller steps. It can take extra patience and persistence. Talking things over with a professional can help.

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Just as children need to practice a new skill, parents need practice when trying new ways of parenting.
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What parents can do

There are things you can do to help your child know what is expected and to learn self-discipline.

Plan ahead

Thinking ahead about your needs and your child's needs can help prevent a difficult situation. When you go shopping your toddler might get bored, or become tired or hungry. They act out and you get stressed. Plan to shop in short bursts when the shops aren't busy and your toddler isn't hungry or tired. Let them help you in some way.

Teach them your values

Talk to your child about why you want them to do something, not just because you say so. They will learn what is important to your family, e.g. doing things together, listening to each other and speaking with respect.

Be a role model

It is also important to be a good role model by acting in ways you expect of them. Children have a strong sense of justice and fairness and if they see you acting in ways that don't match what you say, they might resist what you tell them. They are more likely to copy what you do.

Notice 'good' behaviour

When children know what is expected and are praised and encouraged for doing this, it builds on their desire to please you. They are 'rewarded' when you notice the good things they do, and when you tell them how proud and happy it makes you feel.

Keep material rewards to a minimum or your child may learn to do things only if there is the promise of a treat.

Build responsibility

Children learn responsibility by being part of making decisions rather than just following what parents say. Even young children can be involved in making simple decisions.

This doesn't mean letting children do what they want without making sure they stay safe. It means guiding them toward good choices by:

- helping them learn how to problem-solve and think about consequences. This builds confidence and skills so they can make bigger decisions as they mature
- letting them learn by doing. They may not always choose what you like but as long as the choice is safe for them and for others, they will learn to trust themselves and to know that you trust them to make good choices
- encouraging them when they make mistakes. Mistakes teach children how to deal with frustration and disappointment. Encourage them to have another go.

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Problem-solving, not punishment teaches responsibility and self-discipline.
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Be clear about rules and limits

Work out your family rules early to avoid problems. They need to be simple, consistent and predictable. Rules can be adapted as children get older and become more independent.



It helps if you:

- have a few simple rules that are easy to follow, e.g. in our family ‘We always take turns’, ‘We never hit people or call them names’, ‘We always clean our teeth before bed’. You could put these on the fridge to remind people. Make sure you follow them yourself
- all know what rules mean, e.g. ‘Be kind to your brother’ may not mean anything to a young child. You might say ‘Be kind to your brother and share your toys with him’
- choose your moment to talk about rules, e.g. when your child is upset or having strong feelings is not the best time
- know what your child is able to do, e.g. if the task is too hard your child may fail
- turn a ‘no-choice’ into a choice, e.g. ‘We are leaving in five minutes. Do you want to get in the car now or in five minutes?’
- don’t give mixed messages. Laughing at what your child is doing while saying ‘No’ will be confusing.

If you ever have to make an exception to a rule, explain your reasons to your child.

Having clear rules about ‘how we do things in our family’ helps children learn what is expected.

Using consequences

Consequences for unacceptable behaviour can help children learn. Involving them in deciding what they are can increase their cooperation. They need to suit your child’s level of understanding and be understood by everyone. You need to be consistent in applying them and make sure they:

- are safe for your child
- happen as soon as possible after the misbehaviour
- fit the behaviour and help your child know how to do it better.



Natural consequences

Children learn to take responsibility when they can see the outcome of their actions. For example, your child might not put their toys away when you ask. When they can’t find their favourite toy, they learn the natural consequence is that you can lose them. This way the parent doesn’t have to do the teaching, the natural outcome is the teacher.

Related or logical consequences

A parent might give a consequence that flows on logically from a child’s actions. For example, your child is running around the yard and you ask them to calm down so they don’t damage the plants. When they knock over a potted plant you could get them to clean up the mess. You might also get them to help you put the plant into a new pot.

When a consequence is related to the behaviour it helps children see the connection between their actions and how they can make up for mistakes.

Losing a privilege

Some parents take away something important to their child to teach them a lesson. Losing a privilege can be less effective because it is not related to the behaviour. The child may comply because they don’t want to lose a privilege, but it doesn’t help them learn what to do. They may resist if they feel the consequence isn’t fair. It may also lead to the child being sneaky to avoid losing something they want.

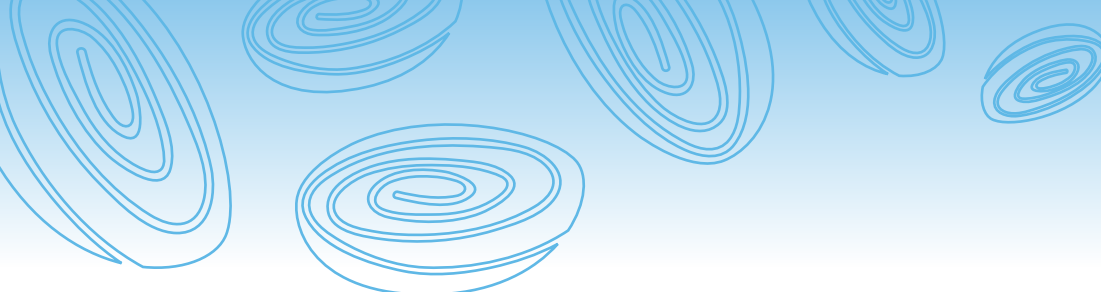
Do these work?

‘Time out’

Some parents use ‘time out’ in order to give children time to think about what they’ve done and what they can change. However, ‘time out’ leaves a child to work things out without the support of an adult. ‘Time out’ for a child under three doesn’t work as they are not able to problem-solve or manage their emotions very well on their own.

Some children can see ‘time out’ as punishment. They may feel you have left them on their own because they are bad, or that your love has been taken away. They can become frightened and distressed which doesn’t help them learn. They may comply to get connected with you again but it doesn’t mean they have learned the lesson.

Sometimes stressed parents feel unable to cope with their child’s behaviour without getting very angry and



feeling they might lose control. A brief 'time-out' for you in these moments can help you calm down. Make sure your child is safe and they know you are nearby.

'Time in'

'Time in' can be more positive and effective. It means staying with your child but removing them from a situation where they are not coping well. You might sit close to your child to help settle them, or hold them gently until they are calm again.

By staying with your child you are helping them learn to manage strong feelings and difficult situations. Once they are calm you can talk with them about what happened and what they could do next time.

'Time in' sends a message to your child that you will not let them do anything to harm themselves or others. It also lets them know you will not let their feelings drive you away. It strengthens the relationship with your child.

Physical punishment

There are many views about whether it is OK to smack children. Some parents believe smacking causes no harm because it happened to them and they turned out OK. However, research tells a different story which has led to over 30 countries banning it. Many studies tell us that children who are hit:

- may change the behaviour for the moment but will probably repeat it as they have only learned what not to do, rather than being taught what is expected
- learn not to do the action in the adult's presence, rather than learn not to do it at all. They can learn to tell lies, cheat or blame others to avoid being hit
- can have strong feelings of anger, injustice and hurt and forget the reasons for the punishment
- can become withdrawn, anxious or depressed
- may be more aggressive to other children, rebel as teenagers or use violence as an adult.

Smacking can encourage bullying as it teaches children it is OK to hit others when you're bigger and stronger, when you're angry or to get what you want. It can also affect a child's self-worth, leaving them feeling shamed and humiliated.

A smack may lead to more or harsher smacking if a parent thinks the first smack didn't work. Stressed parents may lose control and accidentally injure the child.

Physically punishing a child can break trust and respect and does not help them learn the behaviour you want.

What the law says

The law says that harsh or excessive physical punishment of children is illegal and considered to be child abuse (Children's Protection Act 1993).

When an adult hits or assaults another adult it is against the law. This applies to partners, people at work or other adults (Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935). Why is it OK then to hit children who are much smaller and weaker?

Discipline for different ages

Babies (0–1 year old)

It is a waste of time and can be harmful to use any kind of discipline on babies. They are not able to think ahead, understand reason or remember what you want.

Loving touch and gentle words are just as important as feeding and clothing babies. They need to learn that the world around them is friendly and safe and that they can trust you to protect them.

Whatever your baby does, e.g. crying a lot, it is not to be naughty or 'get at' you.

Toddlers (1–3 years)

At this age children are full of life and curiosity. They learn through touch and trying things out and this often means making a mess or using things the wrong way. They like to do things their own way and often get frustrated because they don't yet have the skills they need. They start to say 'No' as they learn they are separate from others.

- Teach and show your child new skills with patience and praise.
- Keep it simple – one new lesson at a time.
- Avoid battles, particularly with eating and toilet training. Unless they're ill, children will eat what they need if given a choice of healthy foods. Don't waste energy trying to make them eat if they don't want to. Avoid a struggle by saying 'You've had enough? OK, let's get you down from your high chair'.



- Toddlers don't yet understand consequences or know how to change their behaviour. It's best to distract them by giving them something else to do. Rather than 'Don't touch the TV' you could say 'Here's that book you like'.

The more your toddler feels competent, in control and able to do things, the calmer they will be.

Preschoolers (3–4 years)

By three to four years children are able to understand most of your instructions and predict the results of many actions. They begin to share and play with others.

Children at this age are easily excited. They can be a bit bossy as they like to be in control. Expect some 'showing off' and being silly. This is an age of copying others, finding fun in being shocked and trying out new words, including swear words if they have heard them.

If your child has reached this age feeling you are loving and approving, they will mostly want to do what pleases you. If they reach this age feeling you are overpowering, demanding and not 'on their side', your child may stop trying to do the things you want because they can never please you.

- Teach by showing your child what you want them to do, and giving choices.
- Teach your child to think ahead. Let them know in advance that a change is coming. You could say 'We need to leave the playground in five minutes so which swing do you want to play on for the last five minutes?'

Children of primary school age (5–12 years)

Children at this age understand much more about themselves, and about rules and limits. They start to see things from another's point of view. Parents need to explain to them about adult behaviours and feelings, and why you react as you do.

- Talk with your child about a wide range of topics. Listen to their views and be willing to discuss different opinions rather than forcing your ideas on them.
- Try to be in step with other parents who have children the same age. If you are too far away from what most parents do around discipline, you may find it hard to get your child to cooperate.
- Teach your child how to work out ways to solve problems. This is a useful skill at this age and an important step towards learning self-discipline.

When to seek help

If a child continually 'misbehaves' or has persistent behaviour that worries you, talk with your doctor or your child health nurse. There may be some underlying cause that your child needs help with.

Learning to be a patient parent

Being a parent means juggling many competing demands. There can be days when things seem too much. If you are also trying to change your parenting approaches remember to be patient with yourself - it can take time for you to learn too!

If you feel overwhelmed, or get frustrated and angry easily, talk to someone who can help. Your doctor is a good place to start.

Want more information?

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

Advice on child development and parenting

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri for an appointment. See www.cyh.com for child health and parenting information

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Time in: guiding children's behaviour', 'Tantrums', 'Living with toddlers' and 'Living with young people' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Raising Children's Network

For parenting information www.raisingchildren.net.org



Government of
South Australia

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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