

A Basic Guide To Discipline: Planning, Guidance and School Behavior

To many people, discipline means punishment. But, actually, to discipline means to teach. Rather than punishment, discipline should be a positive way of helping and guiding children to achieve self-control.

Why Children Need Discipline

You, as parents, are your child's first teachers. Disciplining your child may be difficult, so understanding the reasons for it is important.

For protection

Often, parents discipline children to protect them from danger. A parent may teach a young child not to touch the hot stove by removing her from danger while saying "No, stay away. The hot stove will burn you and it will hurt!"

To get along with others

Discipline can help children learn to get along with others and develop self-control. A 12-year-old reminds her friend of a school rule that helps both avoid a conflict.

To understand limits

Discipline can help children understand limits and learn acceptable behavior. A 6-year-old learns to take turns in class because the teacher and students have set rules for how to behave.

Discipline helps children...

- Think and act in an orderly manner
- Understand the logical consequences of their actions
- Order and use information important for their success in school and elsewhere
- Learn common rules that everyone lives by, such as respect for others' property
- Learn the values that are held by their family and community

The purpose of discipline, then, is to teach children acceptable behavior so that they will make wise decisions when dealing with problems.

Discipline is Not Punishment

Discipline is not the same as punishment. Studies have shown that physical punishment, such as hitting and slapping and verbal abuse, are not effective. While such punishment may seem to get fast results, in the long term it is more harmful than helpful. Physical punishment can discourage and embarrass children and develop low self-esteem in them. Some experts argue that it also promotes physical aggression in children by showing them that violence is acceptable and that "might makes right."

Instead of using punishment to correct behavior, children need to learn what behavior is allowed and not allowed and why. Parents should stress "dos" rather than "don'ts".

An example of positive discipline would be telling your son, "Please pick your clothes up off the floor because I have to vacuum in here," rather than saying something negative like, "Don't throw your clothes on the floor anymore!"

Parents and school discipline

The discipline that children learn at home is the basis for their behavior at school. School discipline should be an extension of home discipline.

Parents should view a discipline problem in school as a home problem, too. If your child's teacher reports a discipline problem, such as acting out in the classroom, talk with your child and the teacher and work on a solution together. Try to find comfortable ways of controlling behavior and redirecting the student's energy. This will encourage and develop self-discipline and good work habits.

Parents should know and support the school's rules. Just as at home, classrooms and schools must have rules of conduct. Studies have shown that the most effective schools are those where students, parents, teachers, and administrators help set the rules. Children are then encouraged to be self-disciplined. Children should know that their parents expect them to follow school rules.

Parents should know the discipline code, policy, or code of conduct of the school. If there is none, parents might suggest that a written behavior code be developed. Or, they might want to help change an existing code if it is no longer appropriate. This will make rules clear and easily understood.

Children need clear rules and consistent enforcement to guide their behavior. In school, as at home, the most effective rules are those decided upon by everyone—students, teachers, administrators, and parents—and enforced by all.

Discipline Tips for Parents

- Set a good example. You are role models for your children. For example, if you want to teach your child that physical violence is not the way to resolve conflicts or problems, then don't use physical punishment.
- Set limits, but be careful not to impose too many rules. Before making a rule, ask yourself: Is it necessary? Does the rule protect a child's health and safety? Does it protect the rights or property of others? Too many rules are hard, if not impossible, to enforce.
- Keep rules simple and understandable.
- Involve children as much as possible in making family rules. They are less likely to break rules that they have helped establish.
- Help your child understand rules and what happens when they are broken. If you and your 4-year-old agree that he shouldn't cross the street alone and he breaks this rule, be ready to enforce the consequences.
- Be flexible. Some rules may work when a child is young, but as children get older, they need and want more independence. Remember, not all children respond in the same way.
- Help your child develop self-control. Young children do not have the self-control needed to follow all the rules all of the time. A 5-year-old may not have the self-control needed not to take a cookie from the cookie jar before dinner. To help the child resist, a parent can move the cookie jar out of sight or offer a snack that is allowed.
- Tell a child about behavior that is annoying to you or others.

- Act quickly when a child misbehaves. Don't let a problem build up over time.
- Be consistent. Agree with other family members on methods of discipline. This way, a child always knows what will happen if he or she does not follow the rules.
- Praise a child for good behavior and accomplishments. Let the child know you appreciate his or her efforts.
- Avoid power struggles with your children. Discipline is not a game in which there is a winner and a loser. You expect cooperation from your child and your child expects you to be fair. Respect your child enough to allow disagreements at times.
- Offer positive suggestions. Avoid criticism and nagging. Criticism and nagging can cause your child to become resentful or angry or develop low self-esteem.
- Encourage independence and responsibility.
- Keep your sense of humor.
- Tell your children how much you love them. When they misbehave, let them know it is their behavior that you dislike, not them.