

Positive discipline

Positive discipline is about teaching children how to behave as well as helping them understand the consequences of their behaviour.

Children need clear boundaries to feel secure

By disciplining them from an early age we provide them with the opportunity of understanding our values as well as what is expected of them within the family, school and the wider community. Discipline is not about punishment. Ideally, it begins from the earliest stages in a child's development with parents and adult carers helping children to understand what is right and wrong whilst creating a secure place from which to experiment and learn about life.

If discipline has not been part of a child's life from the start it can still be implemented. It is important that a child's main carers are consistent in their approach to discipline. This creates greater security for your child. It is helpful if other important people in your child's life can share and reinforce your view.

Listening

This is perhaps the greatest gift we can give a child. It demonstrates the love and respect you have for them and teaches them from the earliest stages that what they say and think is important to you. It also teaches them to behave towards others in the same way. This helps create a confident child who is valued and values others.

Shouting

There probably isn't anyone who is part of a family who hasn't resorted to shouting from time to time, but usually when voices are raised so are emotions...and none of you can hear each other. If there is shouting, it is important to:

- back off and create some space
- discuss the situation again when both parties are calm
- negotiate if possible, if negotiation is out of the question then be quietly assertive and explain your reasons.

Positive discipline strategies to use

Plenty of positive attention: Praising positive behaviour by being specific and ignoring minor naughtiness will encourage a child to seek positive attention.

Mum: "It was so helpful to me that you played so nicely with your brother while I answered the phone. Look how happy you have made him. Thank you."

Star charts and rewards: Help teach your child the concept of delayed gratification. Your child learns that good behaviour can have positive consequences.

Time out and withdrawal of privileges: As a last resort, give one minute out for each year of life. For older children withdraw a specific privilege.

Explain very clearly the reason and when it is over you both forget and move forwards. Mean what you say: Be firm when no absolutely means no. You can listen and acknowledge your child's view but sometimes you must be the adult.

Remember: you are the child's parent or family member, not their friend.

Dad: (to toddler putting his fingers into an electrical socket): "NO. That is very dangerous and I would be very sad if you got hurt."

Be prepared to repeat the process calmly and firmly until your child understands.

Grandparent: "Say sorry to Rajid for pushing him."

Child: "But he took my tractor when I was playing with it!"

Grandparent: "I can see you feel really cross, but we don't push. Let him have it for five more minutes and then it will be your turn. I will count the time."

Grandparent to child later when alone:

"If you really don't want anyone to play with your tractor we can leave it in the cupboard next time."

In this way you are still making sure that your child understands the concept of sharing while acknowledging his feelings but you are also negotiating an alternative which helps your child arrive at solutions.

Be a good role model: Children learn by example. You can't expect them to tidy up their toys if you leave your stuff strewn around.

Tell them what you want: Ask for what you want rather than for what you don't want. "Please put your coat away" rather than: "Don't throw your coat on the floor".

Avoid empty threats: Instead explain what your bottom line is and stick to it.

Give choices: Parent or adult carer: "I see you have quite a bit of homework tonight. How about having something to eat and then you can decide to get started on the homework and have a break later? Or would you prefer to have the break now and then do your homework?"

The 'tidy your room' debate: Families continuously bring this subject up on the helpline. It raises the whole issue of privacy, which is an important concept to teenagers. Try to negotiate boundaries and rules that allow teenagers to feel they have a private space that they have control over. Allow for an acceptable level of cleanliness to ensure a healthy environment.

Choose your battles: As your child gets older it may well be more sensible to steer away from the tidy room issue and concentrate on the more important issues like safety.

Singing from the same hymn sheet

It is important that all those within your family and friends, including stepparents, grandparents and older siblings, understand your values and approaches to discipline. This can be difficult when their opinions are different from yours, but it is important to keep them involved and updated.

If in a couple, try to support each other in keeping the 'bottom line'. It is easier for a child to keep one message rather than two conflicting ones. Try to agree with your partner any strategies you are considering. This may be particularly difficult if you have been a lone parent for some time and are now in a new relationship.

Finding ways to agree will help you support each other in dealing with behaviour. Non-resident parents can help in keeping boundaries. Get them involved with decisions otherwise they may undermine your plans unintentionally.

Looking after yourself

Being a parent or primary carer is a tough job. If you are feeling angry, tired or out of control, try to get some help and support for yourself - perhaps a relative or a friend could give you a bit of a break.