Discipline Tips for Young Children

When dealing with their child’s behavior, many parents would say they use either the time-out method or spanking. Would you consider these approaches to be discipline or punishment?

Discipline shapes a child, teaching the child to understand limits at home or in other settings. While you can make rules for how they should behave, most children do not begin acting with self-control until their middle childhood years (around ages 7 to 9). For children younger than this, discipline is learning self-control. If used correctly, the time-out method is a form of discipline.

Punishment is what the parent does to stop the child from doing what the parent dislikes. Punishment usually involves some painful, physical or verbal action by the parent that stops the undesired behavior temporarily. Spanking is an example. Punishment reinforces the child’s need for someone else to control his or her behavior instead of building the child’s self-control.

The first step in discipline, is understanding why a young child is misbehaving. According to child development experts, children usually misbehave for one of four basic reasons: attention, power, revenge, or inadequacy.

Q- My child always wants my attention. What can I do?

Children need to be loved. A child will work hard to be noticed and will often use negative behaviors to get attention. Although it may be difficult, a good strategy is to ignore the child’s bad behavior. By ignoring bad behavior, you are not encouraging the misbehavior by giving the child the attention that he is seeking. At the same time encourage the child’s good behavior. Take extra efforts to show the child that she is loved at all times so she will not have a need to compete for your attention. A touch or pat on the back may work. Busy parents should consider having a special time to give each child their undivided attention.

Q- How do I handle power struggles with my child?

Young children need to be in control of the situation. They want to be the boss and prove that no one else can boss him/her around. Realize that when you fight with a child you only increase his or her desire for power. Refuse to get into a power struggle with your child. Don’t give in but don’t fight. Wait until you and the child calm down then talk. Give the child choices, and be sure you are comfortable with all the choices you provide. Don’t give a choice that includes a punishment- “eat dinner or go to bed”. Build your child’s self esteem. Think of ways to create a win-win situation where the child does
something he or she wants to do and that “something” is also something that you as a parent can accept. When children are given choices, children learn to make decisions and are less rebellious.

Q - Why does my child seem mean sometimes?

If a child feels worthless, disliked, or hurt, they may resort revenge. The child wants to make it known that he is hurt and does not feel safe. The child is hurting and wants you to hurt so you understand how he feels.

Q - What can I do when my child is striking out?

Use patience and understanding to reflect on the child’s feelings about himself and others. Avoid feeling hurt yourself. Don’t fight back with your own hurtful actions, words, or punishment. Work at building a trustful loving relationship with your child. Using hurtful actions or words will only make the problem worse. Model the behavior you want your child to learn.

Q - What do I do when my child acts helpless?

Young children sometimes act helpless to convince other people not to expect anything from them. Parents can address this behavior by responding with encouragement instead of criticism. Criticism adds to the child’s feelings of helplessness. Encourage your child to try things, focusing on the child’s strengths. Refuse to feel sorry for the child and avoid doing things for the child. Feeling sorry for the child will serve to convince her that as a parent you also do not have faith in their abilities.

Parenting is both the most challenging and the most rewarding job there is. For more information on parenting concerns, contact Belinda Bogle with the NC Cooperative Extension at 704-922-2122.

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