

About effective discipline

What is effective discipline?

Often when we read or hear the word 'discipline' it seems to mean punishing children when they do something wrong. In fact, the word 'discipline' means to teach. Effective discipline helps to prepare children for knowing what to do and how to behave in a range of situations. Having good information about discipline practices that have been found to be effective for supporting children's development and mental health and wellbeing can help parents and carers make the sometimes difficult job of parenting a little easier.

Effective discipline is important for:

- protecting children from danger and helping them to feel safe and secure
- teaching children to understand and care about others
- teaching children emotional self-control and self-direction
- helping children to develop a sense of responsibility
- teaching children values
- helping children to be happy and well adjusted.

What effective discipline involves

Parents and carers who provide discipline as part of a loving and secure relationship with their children help children feel secure and self-confident. Children benefit from knowing that their environment is stable and that a competent adult is taking care of them.

There are three aspects to effective discipline

- 1 A learning environment that is positive and supportive
- 2 Strategies for building skills and strengthening positive behaviours
- 3 Strategies for decreasing undesired behaviours

Positive and supportive environments for learning

Building strong parent/carer-child relationships

Discipline techniques are most effective when children feel cared for and know that their needs will be met.

Quality time

Ensuring that there are times in your day for appreciating and enjoying your children's company is very important for building and maintaining positive relationships. Taking a little time for playing and having fun together helps everyone relax and encourages caring and cooperation. As children get older, you may find that having time to talk together is important for maintaining close relationships. Time to talk, and more importantly time to listen, helps children to feel understood and supports positive self-esteem.

Positive attention

Giving children regular attention helps to meet their needs for care. Providing attention to children when they are doing something positive makes it more likely they will continue to seek parents' and carers' attention through positive rather than negative behaviour. Simple acknowledgements are very effective ways for parents and carers to provide positive attention to children, for example: "Thanks for picking up your toys," "Well done for finishing your homework before dinner," or "You played really well today. It's great to see you getting along and having fun."

Strategies for building skills and strengthening desired behaviour

Praise

The most important part of effective discipline involves guiding children to recognise and use behaviours that are appropriate for the situations they encounter. Learning to manage feelings, help around the house, organise schoolwork and cooperate with others are some examples of behaviours that primary school children gradually develop with guidance and support. By noticing and praising children's positive behaviour, adults can effectively guide children to use desired behaviours. This is especially important when children are learning to manage new situations or behaviours.

When praising children for good behaviour, it helps to be very specific. Tell them exactly what behaviour, actions and words you noticed and appreciated, such as:

"Thank you for your help. You remembered to clear away the dishes without a reminder," or "I was really happy that you were so patient. You sat quietly and waited for me to finish my conversation." Providing specific and enthusiastic feedback to children in this way helps them to understand what you expect, and to feel good about making the effort to behave in ways you approve of.

The best reward is something that the child values. It should only be given *after* the child has shown the desired behaviour.

Rewards

As well as praise, other kinds of rewards can often be very helpful, especially when children are learning new routines or taking on new responsibilities. There are many possible rewards for children's behaviour.

The best reward is something that the child values. It should only be given *after* the child has shown the desired behaviour. When used in this way, rewards help to demonstrate to children that you have noticed and appreciated their efforts.

Some parents and carers worry that rewards will 'spoil' children and lead them to want rewards for everything they do. When you clearly specify the desired behaviour and ensure that only that behaviour is rewarded, spoiling does not occur. However, if nagging and whining are followed by rewards, children will continue to nag and whine as they learn that this kind of behaviour pays off.

The key to using rewards effectively is to be specific about the behaviour you intend to reward and avoid rewarding unwanted behaviours. Select rewards that the child enjoys or values. After the desired behaviour has been learned, rewards can be phased out.

Sample reward menu

Provide frequently		Provide occasionally
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Praise• A hug	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stickers• Stars on a chart	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A special outing• Stay up late
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A fun activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen to music or watch TV	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a friend sleep over
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read a story together	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A special food or snack	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Go to the movies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play with a special toy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visit friends or relatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A new game or toy

Routines

Regular routines, where the same things happen in the same way at the same time each day, are very important for supporting children's positive behaviour. Establishing routines for bedtime, meal times, bath time, homework and other things that happen as a regular part of their day helps children know what to expect. Routines provide a sense of security so that children feel more settled. This, in turn, is likely to increase their positive behaviour.

Setting expectations and limits

Setting limits for children involves communicating your expectations clearly and following through consistently. When setting limits or establishing routines, state directions specifically, positively and confidently so that children are in no doubt about what you want them to do and that you expect them to do it. Avoid overwhelming them by giving too many directions at once or by expecting things that are too difficult for their level of ability. The limits you set should be ones you are confident the child can meet.

It is very important to follow through on your expectations. Being consistent (but not rigid) shows that you mean what you say and can be counted on. When expectations are applied inconsistently (eg some days you don't bother about the mess they leave and other days you insist that they must clean up), children are more likely to test or ignore the limits you set. Keeping rules and expectations to the few that are most important to you helps parents and carers to be consistent.

Giving choices

Giving children choices helps them learn the skills for responsible decision-making. It allows them to feel part of decisions that are made and to understand that the ways they behave are under their control. Letting children make (some) decisions and praising their responsible choices supports the development of positive social values.

It is important to offer choices that are appropriate for the child's age and abilities. You might, for example, offer children a choice between two different household chores. Choices can also be used to reinforce standing rules, for example: "Remember that homework needs to be done before you go to your friend's house. You can choose to do your homework now and go to your friend's house later, or you can choose to relax now and do your homework later, but not go to your friend's as well." For more information on children and choices see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on making decisions.

Being consistent and applying consequences

Logical consequences relate directly to the behaviour or situation. For example, if a child is using a toy inappropriately or dangerously, a logical consequence would be to remove the toy. If children are arguing over what to watch on television, it could be turned off. Logical consequences work best when you explain clearly and calmly why you are imposing the consequence, for instance: "You are not playing safely with that toy, so I will put it away now until after dinner." Children respond most positively when the consequence is applied for a short time only and is followed with an opportunity for children to show they can behave appropriately, with your support and guidance. Be sure to acknowledge the appropriate behaviour with praise.

Strategies for decreasing undesired behaviours

Children can behave in undesired ways for many reasons. They may not have learned what the appropriate behaviour is, they may not have learned how to manage feelings such as frustration or anger, or they may feel confused or insecure in an unfamiliar situation. Parents and carers may unintentionally contribute to the pattern of undesired behaviours by giving children attention when they occur.

The most effective way to reduce undesired behaviour is to help your child learn an appropriate behaviour to replace it with. Teach children what it is you want them to do and provide them with rewards and positive attention for doing it. Shift your focus to the positive behaviour and avoid giving attention to the undesired behaviour. If necessary, apply logical consequences when undesired behaviour occurs. Maintain your calm when following through with consequences to ensure the child understands your intention.

Quiet time

When undesired behaviour is serious or repeated, you may find it helpful to remove the child from the situation for a period to calm down. In addition to making it clear to children when their behaviour is unsafe or not appropriate, this helps to teach them how to manage emotions that may be running high. To use quiet time effectively it is necessary to have a designated space where children can sit quietly, without distractions, for a brief period.

It is best to take firm charge in this situation. Calmly describe the undesired behaviour and the consequence, for example: "You hit your brother. You need to go to quiet time." It is important not to get into a debate or argument but to follow through directly. When children go to quiet time, let them know that they can come back after they have been quiet for a specified time – usually one or two minutes for younger children or up to five minutes for older children. After the time is up, let them go back to the activity and follow up with praise for appropriate behaviour as soon as possible.

Some children behave in ways that are persistently defiant and aggressive. When this pattern occurs often and is more extreme than for other children their age, they may need help for a serious behaviour problem.

For more information, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on serious behavioural difficulties.

Keys to effective discipline

Prevention is better than cure

Make sure your expectations are clear and well-matched to the child's age and capacity. Keep the emphasis positive and be sure to show you appreciate when children do what you ask.

Be firm but fair

Having a few simple rules helps children understand what the limits are. Set reasonable and enforceable limits and follow through consistently. Being consistent is easier when you focus on the things you think are most important.

Keep cool

Avoid getting into power struggles that inflame emotions. Recognise your own triggers and use strategies for cooling down, such as walking away and discussing the issue later when you are calm. 'Time out' for parents and carers, when you take time to relax, can be a very important strategy for managing your responses to cope with and building positive family relationships and discipline issues.

Teach rather than punish

Teach the behaviour rather than punish the child. Punishment focuses on showing the child what *not* to do rather than helping him or her learn what *to* do. The emphasis is often solely on the problem rather than on supporting the child to find more effective and appropriate behaviours. When punishment is blaming or hostile it can cause resentment and damage relationships.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

