

Using effective discipline

"Max, it's eight o'clock. Time for bed." Eight-year-old Max didn't move. He was watching TV. "Max, did you hear me?" said his father. "Just a minute," said Max. "My show's not finished." "You've got school tomorrow and you need your sleep." "I'm not tired," Max replied. "But you will be in the morning," said Dad. "Okay, just let me see the end."

At 8:20pm Max's Dad asked again, "Has it finished yet?" "Nearly," said Max.

At 8:45pm, when the show finished, Max still did not have his pyjamas on. By the time he got ready for bed it was 9:20pm. "Good night, Max" said his Dad. "But Dad, I can't go to sleep without a story."

Setting limits for children's behaviour

It's not always easy to get children to do as they are asked. Whether at bedtime or in other situations, children often try to challenge the limits adults set. An important part of positive discipline involves setting effective limits for children's behaviour. Setting clear and effective limits supports children's development. Knowing that an adult is in charge helps children feel safe. It can also help to reduce stress in family relationships and make parenting easier.

It's also very important not to unintentionally reward children for not meeting your expectations. In the story, Max's father unintentionally rewarded Max for ignoring his instructions. By being allowed to decide when to stop watching TV, Max got the message that bedtime was flexible and he continued stretching the limits.

Positive discipline techniques help parents and carers manage children's behaviour with less stress and maintain positive family relationships.

How to set effective limits

Be firm but friendly

Getting children to follow reasonable instructions does not mean you have to threaten or get angry. Getting angry heats up the situation and can also damage relationships. It works better to first get children's attention, and then tell them clearly and calmly what you want them to do.

It helps to get up close and look at children directly as you give them an instruction calmly. Making it very specific helps too. Giving them notice ahead of time with prompts can reduce conflict, particularly with older children, for example: "Max, you need to go to bed in five minutes. When I come back I want you to switch off the TV and go and get your pyjamas on."

How to set effective limits – continued

Set up rules and routines

Having some basic rules in place helps children understand what you expect of them. Setting up consistent routines for daily activities like bedtime, meal times, bath time and homework means everyone knows what to expect. Having routines also helps children to feel secure.

Rules work best when they are simple, few, and positively state what you expect children to do. Asking children to help you make the rules can improve their cooperation. For example, involving Max in advance when his parents decide on a reasonable bedtime would mean there is less to negotiate at night when everyone is tired. This would make it easier for Max's Dad to firmly say, "Max, we agreed on bedtime at eight o'clock. That's the rule on school nights."

Be consistent

Children are more likely to follow your instructions when they know you will follow up. If you are not consistent about enforcing the limits you set, children are more likely to test or stretch them.

When setting rules and limits, be sure they are enforceable and that you are prepared to stand by your word. Remember to set a good example by following the rules yourself!

Acknowledge, encourage, praise

Show you appreciate children's efforts in meeting your expectations by praising and thanking them. Your approval is a great encouragement for children. Using an incentive plan for a short period of time can be useful for providing more tangible encouragement for children to comply with the rules you set.

Setting effective limits is not about having lots of strict rules and punishments. It means making your expectations very clear and being consistent in following through.

Here's what worked for Max

Max's Dad set up a challenge for Max to see how many times he could get to bed before eight o'clock on school nights. Each day that Max got to bed on time, his Dad gave him a footy sticker (Max was a great footy fan and loved collecting stickers).

As well as the stickers, if Max got to bed on time two nights in a row, then he would be allowed to stay up on the weekend to watch the first half of his team's match on TV. If he got to bed on time for four nights, he would get to watch the whole match. And if Max could get to bed on time for all five weeknights, the deal was that Dad would take Max to see his team's footy match live.

Max's bedtime record

	Week 1		Week 2	
Sun	8:00	✓	7:45	✓
Mon	8:10		7:50	✓
Tue	7:50	✓	8:00	✓
Wed	7:55	✓	7:50	✓
Thu	8:05		7:55	✓
	3/5		5/5	
	Good effort Max! You get to stay up and watch footy until three-quarter time on Saturday night		Fantastic! Max and dad get to go and see a footy match live!	

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

