

Discipline in the Early Years

We've all been there. Your child is having a complete meltdown, everyone is staring at you, and you've got the glazed over/deer in the headlights look because you're not sure what to do! This happens to the best of us as parents, but we can reduce the frequency of these situations with a little bit of pro-active discipline. Let's talk about what we can do to prevent some (not all) of these challenging behaviors!

What Is Discipline?

Discipline (the word itself means to impart knowledge and skill > to teach) is the process of guiding your child in what type of behavior is acceptable and what type is not acceptable. There are many terms for discipline, like: positive guidance or positive behavioral supports, but for the sake of simplicity, we are going to refer to it as discipline.

Discipline does not involve being mean, pointing out failures, or making anyone feel badly about themselves (including us as parents). The intent of discipline is to give a child the foundation they will need to live a better life as they grow older. It comes by way of self-regulating, taking directions from others, feeling competent as a person, being socially and emotionally adept, etcetera, etcetera. Simply stated—it's really important to your child's overall development.

Establishing "It"

The responsibility of a parent is to help their child become self-reliant, respectful, and self-controlled. Relatives, schools, churches, therapists, health care professionals, and others can help. But the primary responsibility for discipline rests with parents and is best done in a child's earliest and most formidable years.

First, let's start by taking a look at your current parenting style. There are four types of parenting:

Authoritarian Parenting

In this style of parenting, children are expected to follow the strict rules established by the parents. Failure to follow such rules usually results in punishment. Authoritarian parents fail to explain the reasoning behind these rules. If asked to explain, the parent might simply reply, "Because I said so." These parents have high demands, but are not responsive to their children. According to Baumrind, these parents "are obedience- and status-oriented, and expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation" (1991).

Authoritative Parenting

Like authoritarian parents, those with an authoritative parenting style establish rules and guidelines that their children are expected to follow. However, this parenting style is much more democratic. Authoritative parents are responsive to their children and willing to listen to questions. When children fail to meet the expectations, these parents are more nurturing and forgiving rather than punishing. Baumrind suggests that these parents "monitor and impart clear standards for their children's conduct. They are assertive, but not intrusive and restrictive. Their disciplinary methods are supportive, rather than punitive. They want their children to be assertive as well as socially responsible, and self-regulated as well as cooperative" (1991).

Permissive Parenting

Permissive parents, sometimes referred to as indulgent parents, have very few demands to make of their children. These parents rarely discipline their children because they have relatively low expectations of maturity and self-control. According to Baumrind, permissive parents "are more responsive than they are demanding. They are nontraditional and lenient, do not require mature behavior, allow considerable self-regulation, and avoid confrontation" (1991). Permissive parents are generally nurturing and communicative with their children, often taking on the status of a friend more than that of a parent.

Uninvolved Parenting

An uninvolved parenting style is characterized by few demands, low responsiveness and little communication. While these parents fulfill the child's basic needs, they are generally detached from their child's life. In extreme cases, these parents may even reject or neglect the needs of their children.

Impacts of Parenting Styles

We all want what's best for our children. In the aspect of human development over the lifespan, early childhood is considered a critical period. Parents often don't realize how their parenting choices and style greatly affect their child's later development and behavior. This is not meant to scare you, but rather help you-help-your- child be the best person they can later in life!

Since different parenting choices can have different effects on child development outcomes, you'll want to know what your style may produce:

Authoritarian parenting styles generally lead to children who are obedient and proficient, but they rank lower in happiness, social competence and self-esteem.

Authoritative parenting styles tend to result in children who are happy, capable and successful.

Permissive parenting often results in children who rank low in happiness and self-regulation. These children are more likely to experience problems with authority and tend to perform poorly in school.

Uninvolved parenting styles rank lowest across all life domains. These children tend to lack self-control, have low self-esteem and are less competent than their peers.

Choosing Discipline Techniques

The discipline techniques you choose may depend on the type of inappropriate behavior your child displays, your child's age, your child's temperament, and your parenting style. The following techniques can be incredibly helpful:

Recognize good behavior

Acknowledging good behavior is the best way to encourage your child to continue it. Despite what their meltdowns might say, children do love to please! Compliment your child when he or she shows the behavior you've been seeking and potentially offer a reward if you feel it was a large milestone/accomplishment.

Develop a stern face & tone of voice--and then don't be afraid to use it!

Children need to know when you are serious. If your child is running into a busy street, you wouldn't politely ask if they'll stop, you get their attention! Asking them to follow directions is no different (although you can use less screaming and special effects). Each teacher here has a "stern face/voice" and uses it when needed. The child knows the line has been drawn, warnings have been given, and the next step is a consequence.

Natural consequences

Natural consequences are you letting your child experience the result of their choice/behavior. There's no need for you to "lecture" or have long talks about what they did wrong. Young children don't understand lecture based discipline and you could end up shaming them which is not beneficial ([read Erik Erikson's Theory, Stage 2](#)). An example of a natural consequence would be if a child deliberately breaks a toy, he or she no longer has that toy to play with because it's broken (and likely in the garbage).

Natural consequences can work well with children who don't seem to "hear" your warnings about the potential outcome of their behavior. It's a great way to get children to understand the cause and effect of their choices. Be sure, however, that any consequence they might experience isn't dangerous.

Logical consequences

This technique is similar to natural consequences, but involves describing to your child what the consequences will be for unacceptable behavior. The consequence is directly linked to the behavior. For example, you tell your child that if he/she doesn't pick up their toys, those toys will be removed (put away) for the week. Like natural consequences, this practice works well with children, naturally building connections between their actions/behaviors and consequences.

Taking away privileges

Okay, so sometimes there isn't a logical or natural consequence for a bad behavior -- or you don't have time to think it through! In this case, the consequence for unacceptable behavior may be taking away a privilege. This discipline technique works best if the privilege is:

- Related in some way to the behavior (even if you need a few minutes to think about it and then communicate the consequence!)
- Something the child values
- Does not reinforce the bad behavior (like going to time out from nap time for playing—time out only allowed them to “escape” the naptime, which was the intended result for the child!)
- It “fits” the crime—isn't too severe or too mild
- Taken away as soon as possible after the inappropriate behavior
- Focused on teaching the child something

Time outs

This discipline technique can work with children when the child is old enough to understand the purpose of a time out -- usually around age 2 and older, with about a minute of time out for each year of age. Time outs often work best with younger kids for whom the separation from the parent, teacher or activity is truly seen as a deprivation. They are not effective if time outs are given as a consequence for something the child was trying to get out of. It's important that shame tactics are not used with this technique (lecturing or prolonged "why's" for the behavior, for example). Time outs are also helpful for the parent/adult if they are getting angry or vengeful towards the behavior. Know when you need a timeout as well! Although you probably can't take a minute per year of age; your child could potentially make the most of being unsupervised and this would be a negative reinforcement. 😊

What about corporal punishment and spanking?

Corporal (physical) punishment, such as spanking (or even withholding food), isn't recommended. Why? Primarily because nonphysical discipline techniques work better with fewer negative consequences. Behaviorists, developmental psychologists, and/or theorists can give you lots of reasons not to hit your child, or you can read some wonderful [information](#) about it. Know that if you choose to spank, it may result in some of the following problems:

- It can make a child more aggressive
- it can become progressively violent and harm the child
- it reinforces the idea that hurting someone is OK (not just physically).
- A child may lose respect for the parent ("do as I say, not as I do")

Tips for Maintaining Discipline

Whichever discipline techniques you choose to use, they can be more effective if you keep these ideas in mind:

Be consistent!

Any technique will fail if you don't follow through or enforce consequences consistently. Remember, you are trying to teach your child (and their brain) to make connections. Unless there is consistency, those connections cannot be made. If you say, for example, that toys will be off limits for a week, then you must follow through and have them off limits for the week. However, remember (as mentioned before) that the "time fits the crime", perhaps a few days would suffice!

Important: don't break your discipline rules by giving in during public exhibitions of bad behavior, such as a child throwing a tantrum while shopping. If you give in to the child's demands, the tantrums will continue. Even if you must leave your grocery cart, walk to the car and "take a break", teach your child that you will discipline and follow through regardless of the environment or circumstances presented.

Try to keep your goals and your techniques consistent over time as well. If more than one adult is responsible for the child's discipline, be sure they are aware of your discipline techniques and use them consistently. C Street uses all these techniques--fit to the child and behavior.

Guide your discipline techniques to fit well with your child's temperament.

The key to effective discipline is to understand who your child is, especially his/her temperamental style, and use your discipline to **help** him/her achieve his potential given those

talents and tendencies. But your goal should not be to turn him into someone he is not (for example, to turn a boisterous intense child into a mellow laid-back one). Some children are born “spirited” and you’re goal is to help them remain spirited while giving them the appropriate boundaries to succeed.

Communicate your discipline plan

Discipline techniques shouldn't come "out of the blue," especially if you're trying something new. For children who are old enough to understand, during a planned discussion (not in the heat of the moment) explain what you are doing, why, and how it will help them. Older children may be included in choosing which rewards and consequences would be appropriate.

Be respectful, cool and collected

If you show your child respect -- even when disciplining your child -- your child is more likely to respect you, other family members, and other people in his or her life. If you "lose it" or overreact with disrespect and heated anger or frustration, apologize to your child. Remember—children learn by what they see—you have to be what you want your child to be.

When it's done, it's done

After the consequence is over or the time has been served, don't ask for apologies or continue to lecture about the behavior. Again, you want to avoid shaming your child and instead focus on building those connections between acceptable/unacceptable behaviors and successes/consequences. When their done, simply be done and help your child return to an appropriate activity.

Understand what is appropriate for your child's development

Before disciplining a child, make sure that the child really did understand what you asked him or her to do. Sometimes parents make demands for behavior that is beyond the child's ability to comply. Just like other skills in life, behaviors often need to be "grown into". Toddlers will always climb on everything, run away from you, and scream and kick when leaving an activity they were enjoying! It's okay—that's developmentally appropriate for their age. However, if they are still doing this as a preschooler, you will want to figure out what is causing these meltdowns and address the behavior before they get any older. C Street staff members are always here to help.

Look for the "why" behind behaviors

If you notice a pattern of inappropriate behavior, part of the solution is to look for "whys." For example, perhaps your child is upset about something else, such as a friend moving away. Maybe your child had a bad day at school. Perhaps your child feels stressed about family problems. Maybe he is tired or hungry. These explanations don't excuse the behavior, but trying to understand why the negative behavior is occurring can help you and your child find ways to prevent them from happening again and again.

Give yourself a break!

Even if you have the best discipline techniques and parenting style, there are some days when nothing seems to work. Or perhaps you've had a bad day, too! Developing skills for positive discipline takes a lot of practice and a lot of time. If you feel you have made a mistake, be honest. Apologize to your child and explain why you are apologizing. Dust yourself off and move on!

Know When and Where to Go for Help

There may be times when you simply don't know what to do to help your child learn appropriate behavior. Remember you can prevent most, but not all the “bad” days your child will have. The goal is to make those “bad” days the exception and not the norm. If you have tried all these techniques to no avail, you may need to seek outside help or intervention. Any time you have questions about your child's behavior, check in with C Street Staff. They may be able to help or give guidance on a particular issue. Or, they can help point you in the right direction in seeking outside support. Don't forget that we all have your child's best interest at heart, so don't be afraid to reach out.

Generally, if we/you notice any of the below concerns, we want to seek outside professional help right away. The earlier we can catch these behaviors, the better end result for the child. Here is a list of behaviors we would deem as “needing special attention”:

- Ongoing disrespect for all authorities: parents, teachers, and other adults
- Aggressive or destructive behavior
- Social withdrawal: signs of depression, such as feeling blue for a long time or having no friends
- Several relationships within the family are difficult for the child
- Excessive feelings of isolation and/or rejection.
- Feelings of being picked on or persecuted
- Expression of serious violence/threats in artwork, verbal communication, or play
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behavior.

If the rumor is true and we remember only the beginning and the end of what we are told, we are going to end with this: LOVE. Love your child unconditionally. To discipline and to guide *is* to show love. Both will have a tremendous impact on their later success in life as a human being.

If interested, here is some further information for you to read regarding early childhood/brain development:

NAEYC: [Families with Young Children](#)

You Tube: [Sensitive Periods in Early Brain Development](#)

PDF: [The Science of Early Childhood Development](#)

Web Link: [Guidance for Effective Discipline](#)