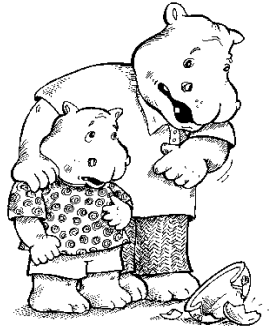


Discipline and Young Children

‘Teaching’ is what discipline is really all about. We use discipline to teach our children self-control. Effective discipline guides children - it shouldn’t force them to obey. The ability to discipline themselves is one of the most important gifts a parent can give a child. The bonus, of course, is a happier home!



The Child Pays

A lack of discipline leads to children who are spoiled and miserable. Other people, and especially other children, don’t want to be around them. The ‘spoiled’ child certainly doesn’t understand why no one likes him or her. They are confused and hurt by others’ reactions to them.

Disciplining a child requires parents to be patient, persistent and really think through what they say and do. The reward, though, is worth it - a happy, well-adjusted child who knows how to accomplish his or her goals and gets along well with others.

Setting the Scene

Babies and toddlers need an environment in which they are free to learn and explore, without constantly being told “No!” As they grow older their world will also grow bigger and you will teach them more about the limits of what they can and cannot do. Make your child’s world a place where the need to say “no” is minimized.

Involve Them in Your Activities

Wherever you are, your children will want to be. This usually means they are in the middle of what you’re trying to do. Rather than chasing them away, develop some acceptable alternatives. For example, in your kitchen, give them a cupboard

filled with plastic containers etc. so that they can cook too. In your office, fill a drawer with junk mail or art supplies so they can work alongside you.

Think About It

When you are busy, “no” may seem like the easiest answer. It is always better to take a few moments to think about your answer. If you’re not sure, tell your child, “I want to give you a good answer, so I will need to think about it for five minutes (or an hour or until tomorrow).”

Give Advance Notice

Children need to know what to expect. Giving children advance notice gives them time to get used to the idea and move on to the next activity. Giving reasons is also very helpful.

Know Your Child’s Abilities

Discipline must match your child’s age and development. Understand what your child is able to do at different ages, and then keep your expectations in line with what he is capable of. For example, a two year old does not understand the concept of sharing and so is unable to share the way you might like him to. By age three however, you can expect him to understand more about sharing.

Young children are not developmentally capable of thinking ahead or keeping promises. They simply don’t understand. You can say to a toddler, “promise Daddy you won’t touch his books again,” and the verbal toddler will nod happily and say, “I promise, Daddy.” But he doesn’t have any idea what ‘promise’ involves.

Many times, what parents see as naughty behaviour is really just the result of the parent having unrealistic expectations of their child, given the stage he or she is at.

So, How Will They Learn?

Clearly State Rules and Expectations

- Reward good behavior rather than focusing on bad behavior.
- Have expectations and use language that is appropriate to their age. For example, “We don’t jump on the couch.”
- Use reasons they can understand. For example, “...because we may fall and hurt ourselves.”
- Describe your expectations. For example, “I expect you to stop now.”
- As much as possible, use language that is positive. For example, “Touch the baby gently,” rather than “Don’t hurt the baby!”
- Offer choices only when you mean it. For example, don’t say, “Would you like to go to bed now?” when what you really mean is “It’s time to go to bed now.”
- Model appropriate behaviour yourself - always use your seatbelt, keep your feet off the coffee table, etc.

Consistency

Make few rules and stick to them. Children are alert to any indecision on your part, so think carefully about your rules.

Reinforcement

Whenever possible children should experience the consequences of their actions. For instance, if three year old Jerrod purposefully hits another child with a toy, in simple language explain the situation to him. “Jerrod, it’s wrong to hit Sally with the toy. I’m going to take the toy away now,” and take the toy away for a period of time.

Time-Out

The term ‘time-out’ is often used to describe situations in which a child needs to leave the group and calm down. Using a time-out is one way of teaching self-control. The point of a time-out is not punishment but to help her calm down and get back on track. Younger children should be with a parent or caregiver who will calm and soothe while explaining why they need to leave the others. Older children should be asked to remove themselves until they can play nicely with the other children.

Teaching Toddlers

As toddlers are just gaining language skills and may not yet be able to remember what the consequences of an action will be, they require simple instruction. For example, if you are trying to teach a toddler not to touch a wall plug, grasp his hand firmly, pull it away from the plug, and say “No, we don’t touch plugs.” If he tries this again, repeat and then remove him from the area of the plug - he is probably too young to remember ‘the rule’ at this age. But he will eventually, so be patient and consistent.

Teaching Good Decision Making

Making good decisions for themselves is a skill that children learn, just like walking. But they will not learn this skill if you make all their decisions for them. They need to practice. And they need to learn from making bad decisions that will not hurt them.

This BC HealthFile has presented some ideas to help you with the challenge of parenting. There are other topics in the child development series that you may also find helpful. The BC HealthFiles link and this series can be found on the BC HealthGuide Web site at:

www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm



For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

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