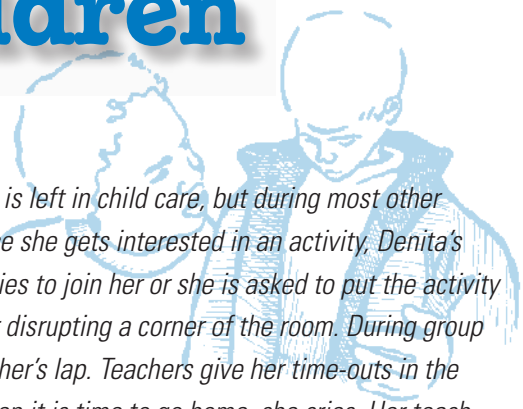
Appropriate Limits for Young Children

A Guide for Discipline



Denita is 5 years old. She whines not only when she is left in child care, but during most other times when she goes from one place to another. Once she gets interested in an activity, Denita's attention is completely focused until another child tries to join her or she is asked to put the activity away. Then she lashes out, usually throwing a toy or disrupting a corner of the room. During group time, she cries until she is allowed to sit on the teacher's lap. Teachers give her time-outs in the beanbag chair, which she doesn't seem to mind. When it is time to go home, she cries. Her teachers and parents are frustrated.

How can Denita's teachers and parents work toward more desirable behavior? Should she be punished or disciplined?

Punishment is taking some action against the child as a payback for a child's behavior.

Discipline is about guiding the child and 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 includes learning to self-control.

Children must pass through several learning and developmental stages as they mature. Discipline issues are a normal part of child development. While it appears that there are "good" and "bad" behaviors, each stage does have a positive and a negative side. Parents and teachers alike must understand these developmental stages in order to determine what behavior they can realistically expect and to decide whether a child's behavior is appropriate.

Why Do Children Misbehave?

According to some child development experts, children usually misbehave for one of four basic reasons: attention, power, revenge, or inadequacy.

Attention—When children believe they "belong" only when they are noticed. They feel important when they are commanding total attention.

> *While Mother was getting ready for work, Amanda jumped up from her breakfast and asked Mom to come help her in the bathroom. Encouraging her that she could manage alone, Amanda began to pull on Mom's leg and whine, "But I may not be able to." Mom replied, "Yes, you can, Amanda, just try it." After a few minutes, Amanda was back asking Mom to snap her pants. Helping her, Mom resumed her routine. Amanda called to her again, "Can you come here?"*

Parents can respond by giving positive attention at other times, ignoring inappropriate behavior, setting up routines, encouraging, redirecting, or setting up special times.

Power—When children believe they belong only when they are in control or are proving that no one can "boss them around."

> *Whitney was ready to go shopping when Dad announced they were going to the mall. She grabbed her jar of pennies, ready to shop. At each store, she asked for items too costly for her budget. When she found an item for less than a dollar, she counted out the pennies and paid. Having spent her money, she continued to whine for other things "she needed." Mom said, "We will need to just leave if you can't quit asking for things." She begged not to leave, so browsing continued.*

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A short time later, she asked for another special item she had seen and loudly insisted she have it. This time Dad tried to get her quiet but had lost patience. "You're mean!" she screamed. She gave a glaring stare and mumbled "You don't love me." Dad took her hand and led her to the car. When she got home, the dollar toy was left in the car, forgotten.

Parents can respond with kind but firm respect, giving limited choices, setting reasonable limits, encouraging, and redirecting the child to a more acceptable activity. When children test their limits and use a public display to assert themselves, parents can continue to stick to the basic rules, letting children know their behavior is unacceptable. Leave the situation if possible (a store or home in which you are a guest). Talk when things are calmer at a later time.

Revenge—When children believe they belong only by hurting others, because they feel hurt themselves.

Larry had been whining when Mom left him each morning with the child care provider. That evening, Dad was cooking dinner while Mom worked late. Suddenly Logan screamed. Dad threw down the potato peeler and ran to see what the problem was. Larry had pinned Logan in a wrestling position and was twisting his ear. Dad hollered to Larry, saying "Why can't you leave your brother alone? Go to your room and wait for me!"

Sometimes the reason for misbehavior is not clear. When there is a new pattern of acting out, children and parents should talk about how they are feeling. Parents can respond by avoiding harsh punishment and criticism, building trust, listening, reflecting feelings, practicing sharing of feelings, encouraging strengths and acting with care.

Inadequacy—When children believe they belong only when they convince others not to expect anything of them because they feel helpless or unable.

Jorge's teacher asked his parents what might be affecting Jorge's work at school. His teacher says, "He doesn't complete assignments and no matter how much I help him, he gets further behind." Mom replied, "He doesn't do anything at home either. I have quit asking him to do any chores at home because when he does them, he is so sloppy and does it so badly, I have to do it again."

Parents can respond by encouraging their children to try things, focusing on the child's strengths, not criticizing or giving in to pity, offering opportunities for success and teaching skills in small steps.

How to Coach Your Child

Emotions are a huge part of what makes setting limits tough on parents and children. Learning how to manage complex feelings is one of the hardest things to master for children and adults alike. However, when there is an outset of emotions—whether it is a bout of happiness, a crying tantrum, or a violent outburst, parents and other adults can help children learn to deal with their emotions.

John Gottman calls this being an *emotion coach*. This is a five-step process that parents can learn:

1. Recognize the emotion. Become aware of your child's moods and learn to recognize his/her cues for various emotions. Begin to view any display of emotion as a time to connect with children, teach them, and help them grow. Listen to your child, and help him/her find words to describe the emotions at hand. Remember that children learn how to handle their emotions by watching parents handle theirs.

2. Build connections. To sustain a healthy relationship with your child throughout life means connecting in good times and bad. So often parents soothe displays of emotions with food, disregarding and ignoring the emotion. Or they suggest that the emotion is wrong. Instead of feeling uncomfortable with emotional displays, listen to the child and name the emotion. Then try to connect by encouraging the child to talk about the feeling. These are wonderful teaching times, and sharing in the moment makes the child feel supported and understood.

3. Listen empathetically. Children are seeking comfort and understanding. When you listen, they learn you care about what they think and feel. Reflect back what you hear the child saying. "It sounds as if your feelings are hurt," or "So you felt left out," or "It sounds as if there is something at school you are not looking forward to." Above all, don't dismiss a child's feelings as silly. They are important to the child. Don't judge or criticize a show of emotions as childish or unnecessary. Take the child seriously, then move to the next steps: label the emotion and begin to talk about how to handle the situation that caused it.

4. Label the emotion. Finding the best word to describe the emotion can sometimes be difficult. However, helping a child name an emotion seems to actually soothe the child. Realize that sometimes two conflicting feelings occur at once. Try not to tell children how they should feel. When you experience a display of emotions in front of your children, name your feelings so your children will get practice in labeling theirs.

5. Set limits and problem-solve. Just letting the emotions be shown and naming them is only part of the process. The real learning occurs when parents can go to the next step, which results in children who are more confident problem-solvers. This starts by first setting limits to help children know when a line is crossed. For example, explain that it is not ok to hit your brother, break toys, or slam a wall because of anger. Learning acceptable ways to express emotions is the first part, but seeking solutions is the critical learning piece. Often creativity is needed to help the

child brainstorm with ideas for solving issues. Give the child time to come up with ideas for handling difficult feelings, then discuss the pros and cons for each idea. This helps a child own the solution and grow in his/her ability to solve problems.

Developmental Milestones

The First Two Years

From birth to about age 2, infants need to build close relationships with their parents or other important people around them. These attachments make it possible for infants to build a sense of love and caring. They are learning to make sense out of permanent objects and developing a sense of trust. Only as children experiment through touching, dropping, pushing, and pulling do they begin to learn.

During this time, children do not believe that things exist unless they can see them. This is why it is so difficult for them to be away from their parents.

To feel close to someone, infants need to be able to count on having their needs met in a timely manner. Gaining a sense of trust is the first stage of their emotional development.

The Preschool Years

These years are the most significant in a person's life. Language and social skills are developed. Children at this age also learn symbols. For example, they learn to see a picture of a ball and recognize that the picture represents a real ball. Recognizing symbols is an important step toward developing important skills such as the ability to read.

Toddling, exploring, and pounding may worry parents, but they are normal behaviors. When children touch, feel, look, mix, turn over, and throw, they are developing skills. Exploration is intellectually healthy and helps children test their independence. Although these behaviors create a struggle between child and parent, they should be expected. Plan for them.

Independence is an emotion to be encouraged during the early preschool years. The alternative is shame and doubt. Many significant events occur during these years (between 2 and 3, toilet training and language in particular). In responding to a child's misuse of language or accidents when toileting, parents and caregivers should be sensitive to avoid using guilt and punishments for what are most likely normal acts of development.

Once children learn to handle independence, they are ready to develop a healthy sense of initiative. Initiative means starting activities, creating, and working. Children who learn to start their own activities lay the groundwork for positive and productive school experiences. Again, explorations, questions, and investigations play major roles in development.

Middle Childhood

From the time they begin school until around age 12, children are in middle childhood, when learning skills become better defined. Children at this stage have higher-order thinking skills and can use them to make more complex decisions. As children they have always believed what adults say as basically true, but they now begin to question the pedestal upon which they have placed adults.

Rules become more significant, and children learn not only rules for games, but rules that will help them understand math concepts and social rules, such as saying "please" and "thank you." Rules make formal education possible.

Closely on the heels of developing a sense of initiative in the preschool years is the development of a sense of industry. Groundwork is laid during this middle childhood for becoming productive members of society. Children can learn to be inferior (or inadequate). Adults should seek to build a sense of confidence that children in middle childhood can do jobs well. Many children have their sense of industry undermined by well-meaning parents and teachers who mistakenly try to use criticism to motivate them.

Strategies for the Adults in a Child's Life

Children spend their young years trying to figure out how they fit into the world. How independent or dependent will they be allowed to be? What will be the consequences of various actions? Who will give them direction? Who will be their role models? In addition to the reasons for behaviors, parents must determine if they have provided a stable, loving, understanding place to help children learn and grow. Consider these questions.

Are expectations for the child clear? Children develop at different rates, have different interests, and certainly have different kinds of homes and families. Are attempts made to prepare the child for new situations? Offer explanations of what the occasion is about and what behavior will be expected so guessing isn't necessary. To prevent reactions, use continuous two-way communication and allow the child a certain amount of responsibility in setting his or her own rules or limits.

Is the behavior driven by the child's need to test the boundaries of particular relationships? Children who realize that the adult will "still love them" if they are "bad" feel secure. They may test boundaries to make sure they are loved, and this may be particularly true when there have been many changes in the family home.

Are consistent limits understood and followed? Children may resist limits if there is too much adult control and not enough room allowed for making their own choices. Discipline allows children to develop their own "inner voice," which will sensibly guide their behavior as they grow. Often adults must be careful that they, too, follow the rules they make for children. Consistency plays a major role in parenting.

Are there good role models for the children to copy? Children who are exposed only to the role models on television or video games will quickly learn that the behaviors they see on TV or in games are what is acceptable. Spending time with children in various settings helps them to learn ways to act. Take them out to eat with friends, and expose them to good manners. Take them to the store with you and show them how to talk with a store checkout clerk. Show them how to say "thank-you" and "please" or to shake hands with an adult they meet. Above all, help them understand how to resolve problems as described above in "How to Coach Your Child."

Finally

Being a parent is difficult. But it is connections with you that the child wants and needs. Time consuming? Yes! But investing in connecting with your young child will prove valuable as the child grows into a teenager. Be there for your child. Give your child choices so they learn to think for themselves. Limit television. Spend time together taking a walk, reading together, making things, riding bikes, or talking. Then you may find it's not really discipline that they need so much as loving guidance and to learn from your best example.

Additional Reading

These Extension publications provide information about guiding your children:

- *Childhood Aggression* (FCS-504)
- *Guiding Your Young Children* (FCS-456)
- *Helping Children Cope with Stress* (FCS-457)
- *Parenting Teens* (FCS-422)
- *Secrets of Parenting: What's the Risk* (FCS-518-05)
- *Secrets of Parenting: Molding, Modeling, Mediating* (FCS-518-01)
- *Secrets of Parenting: Reducing Whining and Improving Children's Self-control* (FCS-518-07)

Other Resources

Dreikurs, R. (1964). *Children:The Challenge*. New York: Hawthorne.

Dreikurs R. & Grey, I. (1968). *A New Approach to Discipline: Logical Consequences.* New York: Hawthorne.

Gottman, J. (1997). *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

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