

Age Makes a Difference



There are four basic guidelines for fathers to keep in mind as they discipline their children:

- ▶ **Age matters.** It's important to know what children can and cannot learn during each stage of their growth and development. Parents need to make sure that the discipline they use fits their child's age and development.
- ▶ **The power of love.** To do a good job of teaching your children desirable behavior, you need to develop a positive emotional relationship with them. Parents need to demonstrate their love for their children through kind words and physical affection. Children can be taught that you love *them*, even if you don't always love their *behavior*.
- ▶ **Mean it.** Parents need to be firm with their discipline so that their children know that they mean what they say and will back it up.
- ▶ **Praise, praise, praise.** Recognize and make positive comments whenever your children behave well (even if it is something small). Parents often fall into the trap of commenting on their children's behavior only when it is unacceptable.

The following are some age-specific hints that can help parents deal with their children's behavior.

Birth to 7 Months

- ▶ Babies cannot help being babies. They do not understand what they have done wrong, and so they cannot be disciplined effectively. Don't try.

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8 to 14 Months

- ▶ Your baby will start to explore the rules but cannot really understand or stick to them.
- ▶ Firmly say — and if necessary repeat — “No.”
- ▶ Remove the baby from the situation, or distract the baby with a toy.
- ▶ Never leave the baby alone except in a safe place, such as a crib or playpen.

15 Months to 2 Years

- ▶ Your baby will begin to test the rules but still cannot stick to them. Most of what the child does at this age is still a *reflex*. The child cannot yet think about what will happen as a result of his or her actions.
- ▶ The best way to manage behavior problems is to remove the child from the situation or to distract the child with another activity.

2 to 3 Years

- ▶ These are the “terrible twos.” Your child will actively challenge the rules to test limits and to get attention.
- ▶ At this age, children begin to imitate; so watch your own behavior, and model the behavior that you want from the child.
- ▶ Set firm limits, and watch your child closely. Children at this age cannot yet control themselves, so you must be in charge.
- ▶ Use redirection (get the child to focus on something else) to manage your child’s behavior. When this doesn’t work, establish a “time-out” chair where your child has to sit quietly for a short period after misbehaving to help him or her get back in control. Redirection and time-outs are good responses because they do not reward the child’s behavior with attention from you. (The length of the time-out should match the child’s age. For example, a two-year-old’s time-out should be two minutes; a three-year-old’s time-out should be three minutes, etc.)
- ▶ Find ways to show your child that she or he does not have to misbehave to get your attention.

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4 to 8 Years

- ▶ Most children during these years come to understand when they have misbehaved. Although they usually are able to control their own behavior, they still need your direction and guidance.
- ▶ Explain to your child what is wrong about the behavior, say how it made you feel, and spell out what you expect in the future.
- ▶ Let your child learn from natural and logical consequences as much as possible. (An example of a *natural consequence* is when a child gets cold as a result of playing outside without a coat; an example of a *logical consequence* is when a parent takes the child's toy away for a day because the child left it in the middle of the living-room floor.)

9 to 11 Years

- ▶ During these years, children should be getting better at managing their own behavior. They know the difference between right and wrong, and they can understand that their behavior has consequences.
- ▶ Be clear about expectations, and decide on consequences in advance. (For example, if your child's bedtime on Friday night is nine o'clock and the child refuses to go to bed on time, he or she will lose the privilege of staying up late next Friday.)
- ▶ The most effective way to handle misbehavior at these ages is to talk about what the child did wrong and why it was wrong.
- ▶ Growing children continue to need praise and positive reinforcement so that they can feel good about themselves. Being there for your children when they need someone to talk with will prevent many situations from becoming problems.

12 to 18 years

- ▶ By the time your children are teenagers, they know the difference between right and wrong. They are also at an age where they will be spending more time away from your protection and guidance.
- ▶ Good communication is essential to your relationship with your teen. Establish a particular time every day when the two of you will talk about how things are going.

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- ▶ Try not to preach to your children. They are now likely to turn to their peers and other adults for advice, so get to know the people who are important to them.
- ▶ Limit rules to those that are necessary for your child's safety.
- ▶ Be clear about your expectations for behavior, and follow through with logical consequences for misbehavior. (For example, tell your 17-year-old daughter that if she misses her curfew, she will not be allowed to go out the next night.)

A Word About Spanking

Experts disagree about the issue of spanking children; some say that spanking is necessary, while others say that it is abusive. Parents have to make their own decision. Before spanking a child to control behavior, first think about the following:

- ▶ Do not spank children who are less than two years old.
- ▶ Be aware of your own adult strength and the fact that physical punishment can become abuse.
- ▶ Spanking does not teach children what they *should* do; it may teach them only what *not* to do.
- ▶ Before you resort to spanking a child, try to figure out alternative ways to teach appropriate behavior.
- ▶ Spanking children for behavior that is natural and normal for their age may make them afraid to try things.
- ▶ Children who are spanked learn that it is acceptable to hit people.
- ▶ Spanking can make a child feel as though he or she is a bad person.