

The Guidance Approach To Discipline

In a guidance approach to discipline, parents use methods that reduce conflicts respectfully for parents and children.

Discipline is not punishment.

It is a means of helping the child learn acceptable ways to deal with personal feelings and desires. Punishment, on the other hand, is a reaction to misbehavior that is usually hurtful and may even be unrelated to the misbehavior. Punishment is ineffective because it does not teach appropriate behavior. Though it may prevent a repeat of the behavior in the short term, it does not teach the child “what to do instead,” so it rarely works in the long term. Punishment may release the parent’s angry feelings and make the parent feel better, but it can create fear or humiliation in the child, and rarely leads to the creation of a respectful relationship.

When children misbehave, parents and other adults need to help the child learn appropriate behaviors. Punishment may give immediate results, but does punishment build self-control? Do children learn to cope with their strong feelings and tough problems if they are punished? Research supports the conclusion that discipline works better than punishment and that children who are punished become very different people than children who are disciplined.

This approach to discipline means using developmentally appropriate guidance.

What is developmentally appropriate? That means you have a clear understanding of the stage of development your child is in. You know what can be expected for the age. With this in mind, you choose to pick a discipline method that best fits the child and the situation.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of this approach is that it is based on open communication, positive discipline and that the techniques can apply to **any** age child. With a little practice and patience, you will experience positive results.

Principles of a Guidance Approach

Research tells us that it’s very important to respect the child’s stage of development and not to label a child as a behavioral failure. Seven principles outline the basics of a guidance approach:

1. Children are in the process of learning acceptable behavior.
2. An effective guidance approach is preventive because it respects feelings even while it addresses behavior.
3. Adults need to understand the reasons for children’s behavior.
4. A supportive relationship between an adult and a child is the most critical component of effective guidance.

5. Adults use forms of guidance and group management that help children learn self-control and responsiveness to the needs of others.
6. Adults model appropriate expression of their feelings.
7. Adults continue to learn even as they teach.

The guidance techniques on pages 2 and 3 provide tips to remember in stressful situations.

Your Role as a Parent

It is important to see children as part of the total family system. Sacrificing everything for their sake is probably not a wise long-term decision or investment. Parents also have needs that must be met. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a renowned child developmentalist, suggests that every child needs to have people who are really crazy about him – who love him with all their hearts. Parents are the people who can give this total love to their child, and it may be the most important contribution they make to their child’s development.

A child needs to know and feel that, no matter what, his parents love him. Parents can tell their child that they may not like the behavior they have just observed, but they will always love him. Love is unconditional and shared in a variety of ways with children.

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Technique Number 1: Being Positive

Focus on “do” instead of “don’t.” Children tune out negative messages.

Examples of changing “don’t” into “do”:

1. Don’t stand on the slide
2. Don’t park your bike there.
1. Sit down on the slide.
2. Your bike belongs in the bike rack/garage.

Technique Number 2: Problem Solving

Protect and preserve your children’s feelings of being lovable and capable.

Examples of ways adults hinder or foster growth of self-concept:

Situation	Destructive responses	Better responses
Mark spills the juice he is carrying into the table.	“Can’t you ever do anything right?”	Here’s the sponge. Wipe it up, and you can try again.”
Your fifth-grader slams the door and yells, “You’re not fair,” after you break up a sibling argument.	“Don’t you tell me what’s fair! You’re getting a smart mouth!”	“It’s not easy to settle arguments. When you’re ready to talk it over, come out and we’ll see if we can solve this problem together.

Technique Number 3: Offering Choices

Offer children choices only when you are willing to abide by their decisions.

Situation	Likely to lead to trouble	Instead, try
It’s shopping day, and your groceries are in short supply.	“What would you like for breakfast today?”	“Would you like toast and jam or cereal for breakfast?”
Your 12-year-old often “forgets” “forgets” her chores.	“Get out here and walk this dog.”	“Are you going to take the dog for a short walk now or a long hike after dinner?”

Give them only the choices of behavior they can, in reality, choose.

Technique Number 4: Considering the Environment

Consider changing the environment instead of the child’s behavior. Adult/child conflicts may arise because some part of the physical setting or environment is inappropriate or because adults expect more control or more mature behavior than children can achieve.

Behavior	Environmental changes
The preschool group has many milk spills at every meal. Their paper cups seem to tip over every other minute.	Provide heavy-bottomed wide plastic glasses or cups.
Your school-age children walk in the house and drop coats and school bags at the back door.	Install low sturdy hooks near the entry.

Technique Number 5: Being Realistic

Observe children, learn what is developmentally appropriate for their ages and then determine the most acceptable way for them to continue what they’re doing.

Problem	Solution
Five-year-old Scott wants to help his parents with their preparation of a German dinner. Efforts to persuade him to watch television or ride his tricycle have failed.	Figure out the tasks Scott can do, then find a workplace for him in the kitchen and let him pitch in.
Sixteen-year-old Susan is a good driver who wants to drive to school every day.	Discuss car availability and work schedules. Develop a plan together to allow driving when possible.

Technique Number 6: Setting Limits

Give children safe limits they can understand. Recognize their feelings, even if they cannot accept their actions. Maintain a calm sense of democracy, and work at being consistent. Children view the world differently than adults. Rules need to be explained clearly and simply. Be certain they know your expectations for their behavior.

Situation	Response
Michelle (age 2) has pushed a chair close to the stove so she can see what's bubbling in all those pots.	The stove is hot. I can see you are curious about the spaghetti sauce. I will hold you so you can see without getting hurt.
It's school pictures day, and your eighth-grader is having a bad morning. She continues to talk about how awful she looks, and she doesn't want to go to school.	I can see that you're frustrated with your hair this morning. Is there something I could do to help? What are your ideas?

Technique Number 7: Modeling Behavior

Set a good example. Speak and act only in ways you want your children to speak and act. Research indicates that the parent model is still the most influential source of learning for children.

If you make mistakes, apologize and be honest. A warm, loving, communicating relationship is important. Everyone makes mistakes. Children are loving and forgiving of parents, if that's what parents model. The importance of parents as models for children cannot be overstated.

Correct the following statements. (These may appear as logical consequences for some readers. Think carefully about the example you are setting.)

Statement	Better statement
"Laura, if you bite your sister, I'll bite you."	"Biting hurts people. You may bite the teething toy, but you may not bite your sister."
"I'm sick and tired of all your excuses. You never listen to me!" (Parent loses temper.)	"I'm really sorry I lost my temper. I had no right to take my frustrations about work out on you. I'll try to leave work issues at work. (Parent sets example for taking responsibility for actions.)"
"Quit your complaining about homework. If you really cared about me, you wouldn't complain to me all the time. Look at all the work I have to do, and nobody helps me!" (Parent continues to complain.)	"You sound really frustrated by all the homework you have. Maybe I can help you break it down into more manageable parts."

Technique Number 8: Thinking Broadly

Look at the whole picture. A child's behavior is often related to stress in some part of the family system. Changes in your behavior or in another family member may result in the child's changing behavior.

Giving children attention is not the same as spoiling them. "Acting out" behavior may be a cry for attention. It is important to take time to be with children emotionally (by talking things out) as well as physically.

Assess the following areas in your child's life when concerns arise:

- Recent family changes or conflicts.
- Sibling relationships.
- School environment.
- Child care setting.
- Peer or play group relationships.
- Physical or health conditions.
- National/International events.
- Neighborhood or community environment.

Getting Off to a Fresh Start

Parents can take the first step toward a developmentally appropriate plan of discipline by examining the current methods or techniques they are using. Ask: Is this suited to the age of the child? Am I correcting, lecturing, doing all the talking, or am I showing and teaching my child an appropriate way to handle things? Am I always talking out of anger? Using commands? Have I used too many threats or criticizing remarks?

Each week try to practice a new technique. It takes time to change old habits and patterns. Don't be surprised if your children react to the changes in you in a negative way at first. Children learn how to adapt to and react to parents, and any changes mean they need time to change too. They may be confused at first. In a short time, though, you will be able to notice changes in you and your children. Contact your county extension office for information about parenting resources.

Preventing Problems

Effective discipline will prevent problems before they arise. This tactic should begin the day your child is born. Examine your behavior, your environment, how you schedule activities for your child, and the rules you have established for behavior. Once you have taken the time to examine yourself, you can begin to do the following:

Demonstrate coping skills. You are your children's first and most influential teacher.

Prepare an appropriate environment. You can avoid a lot of problems by making your home a comfortable place for children to be. Are there tempting or dangerous items within reach? Are toys or supplies accessible? Is there enough room for activities and personal space?

Be clear about rules. Consistent and fair rules help children learn control in their own behavior. Such rules set limits that children can learn and depend on,

regardless of their ages. Rules should be simple and few, clear, necessary and reasonable for the ages of the children. Some adults have only one basic rule: you may not hurt yourself, others or things. Hurt can be explained as physical or emotional as children grow.

Gently remind children of rules. When a problem occurs, calmly stop the action, then say the rule. Be direct and simple. Eventually, the child will think of the rule **before** acting. If a child hits, respond by saying, "Stop! Hitting hurts people." If a child throws food, respond by saying, "You may eat the food or put it away. No throwing food!"

Schedule events with children's needs in mind. Many problems can be avoided by anticipating your children's behavior or reactions to various events. You can arrange their day and distract them

from potential problems. Adjust events to children's short attention spans. Prepare your children in advance and allow time to complete their activities. Keep your children occupied. If they must wait, be prepared with games or stories that help them pass the time.

Help children solve problems, make choices and understand consequences. Engage them in conversation.

Try guiding the child through the problem by asking "What would happen if ..." questions. This will help them learn to make more appropriate choices. Be patient! This is not learned as a result of one or two problem situations! Parents must continue to use this method and congratulate their children's efforts to think things through.

Acquiring problem-solving skills is a process that takes time and repetition.

The following list from a publication for parents written by the National Association for the Education of Young Children summarizes the differences between discipline and punishment.

Children are disciplined when...

they are shown positive alternatives rather than just told "no"
they see how their actions affect others
good behavior is rewarding to them – and at times rewarded
adults establish fair, simple rules and enforce them consistently.

Children who are disciplined...

learn to share and cooperate
are better able to handle their own anger
are more self-disciplined and take responsibility for their actions
feel successful and in control of themselves.

Children are punished when...

their behavior is controlled through fear
their feelings are not respected
they behave to avoid a penalty or when they get a bribe
the adult only tells the child what not to do.

Children who are punished...

feel humiliated
hide their mistakes
tend to be angry and aggressive and blame others
fail to develop control of themselves.

Adapted from *Helping Children Learn Self-Control: A Guide to Discipline*, National Association for the Education of Young Children publication; *Parenting Your Child Effectively*, Herb Lingren, Nebraska Extension publication; *Developmentally Appropriate Guidance*, Minnesota Association for Education of Young Children publication.

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