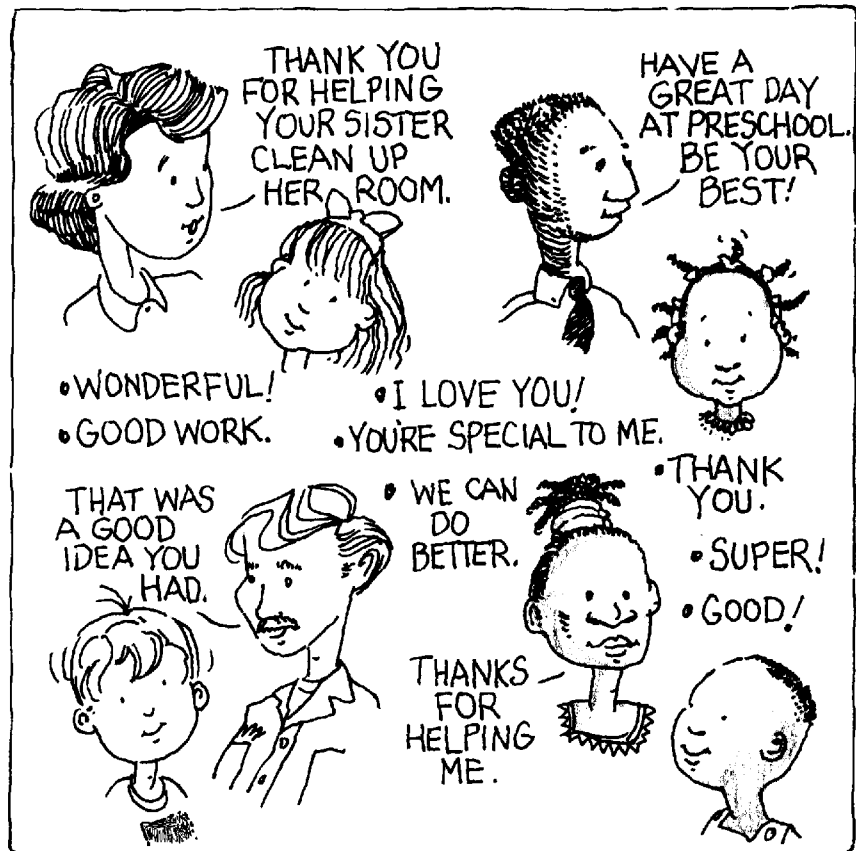


Helping Young Children Behave

One of the best things about being a parent is knowing that your baby needs you. Even though it can be tiring at times, you feel good when you are able to take care of her needs. By the end of the first year, she will begin to develop new skills. She will become more self-reliant and often want to do more for herself. Parents are often surprised and disappointed when their lovable, manageable baby turns into an independent, busy explorer who says "No!"

Even though your young child can do more things for himself, he needs you now as much as ever. Your young child needs you to firmly set limits for his behavior. He needs your guidance to learn how to get along in the world. Setting limits and teaching young children to behave are skills you can learn. This publication will tell you some important things about helping young children learn to behave.



What Is Good Discipline?

The word "discipline" actually means "to teach." The discipline you use to get your child to behave teaches her about herself and about her relationships to others. Good discipline sets limits and rules and helps a child focus on how to follow the rules. Good discipline doesn't punish a child for making mistakes. It teaches her what to do instead.

Some people think discipline means spanking or yelling unkind words to make children suffer

enough so that they will never do wrong again. Unfortunately, this kind of discipline teaches a young child the wrong things. It teaches him that the world is unpredictable and unsafe. This kind of discipline teaches a child that if no one is watching, he can get away with "bad" behavior. It also teaches a child that threatening and hurting people is how to get them to do what you want.

Wise parents understand that good discipline teaches a child to behave even when parents are not around. They know that a child will be better behaved in the long

run if parents act like caring teachers rather than angry "bosses." They know that a child does not need to be taught "who is the boss." Instead, a child needs to know how to get along with other people. Your child will work very hard to please you when you treat her with love and respect while setting fair and firm limits on her behavior.

Discipline for Babies and Toddlers

It is important to know what kinds of behaviors to expect from

your child at different ages. Knowing what your child can and cannot do will help you be more understanding of some of the things you see your child doing. For example, small babies do not cry to control you or make you angry. Babies cry to tell you they need something. They do not need to be disciplined. Instead, they may need to be fed or changed or held. (If you have a baby who cries a lot, you may be interested in another publication in this series, Extension publication HE-717, "Infant Crying: I'm Trying To Tell You Something.")

The most important thing for you to remember is that the best way to help your young child be good is to make it easy. Here are some things you can do to make it easy for your child to be good:

- **Know what is reasonable to expect of her at her age.**

The crawling or walking toddler needs much more supervision than she did before she could move around. She does not know or understand what is safe and unsafe. Help her stay safe by making the house a safe place. It is not reasonable to expect a young child to stay away from electrical outlets, cleaning supplies, or breakable dishes just because you have told her "don't touch." A child this age does not remember instructions very long. If she touches, she is not disobeying you to make you mad. She is just curious. Yelling or slapping a child this age may stop her for a little while, but these actions don't teach her what is safe or unsafe. Instead, they teach her to be afraid and to expect you to hurt her.

- **Make your home "childproof."**

One of the best steps parents of crawlers and toddlers can take to keep children safe and out of trouble is to childproof their homes. Childproofing helps prevent battles over things children can't yet understand. Very young children are going to actively explore their surroundings. They are going to touch things and put them in their mouths. Help your child behave by removing forbidden objects. Cover electrical outlets. Put a gate in front of stairs. Keep breakable and dangerous things out of reach of your child.

- **Avoid trouble before it happens.**

Be aware of what your child is doing and how he might get into trouble. For example, if you see your child moving toward an area you don't want him to go in, step in his path and offer him a different activity. Another way to avoid trouble is to distract your child from doing what you don't want him to do. Show him an alternative behavior or activity. For example, if you find your child putting something dirty in his mouth, give him a cracker or a teething ring or a toy instead. Using prevention and distraction will allow you to save the word "No!" for really important times when your toddler is in danger of hurting himself or others.

- **Let your child know when she is doing things you like.**

Parents who take the time to notice when a child is behaving well will have fewer discipline problems. These parents give their young children plenty of positive attention so that children won't have to misbehave to be noticed. They say positive and encouraging things to their children. They take time to enjoy their children. Some people worry that too much positive attention will spoil children. This isn't true. Positive attention

makes children want to be good. If you would like to know more about spoiling, another publication in this series, Extension publication HE-718, "Am I Spoiling My Child?" can give you some helpful information.

Discipline for Preschool-Aged Children

Children younger than 3 do not understand rules very well. Wise parents know that it is important to explain and enforce important rules anyway. They also know that young children may not always follow them.

Children who are 3, 4, and 5 are better able to follow simple rules that you set. At this age, children's skills at using and understanding language are better. Their ability to remember things has improved. They can understand that there are consequences for breaking rules. Still, they are not very sure of why it is important to follow rules, other than to please you. In time, your child will learn why good behavior is important if you take the time to explain calmly what the child has done wrong and what is the right way to act.

You can help your preschool-aged child behave and follow rules by doing these things:

- Make simple rules and follow through on them.
- Offer simple reasons why misbehavior is not acceptable.
- Give children limited choices.
- Be a good example yourself.



Although children's speech and memory have improved, remember that your child will understand better if you use simple words and sentences. State rules clearly. "No hurting others." "Please put away your toys." "Bedtime is at 7 p.m." Stating rules ahead of time and being consistent will help you enforce the rules better. You do not have to say things like, "Because I said so!" Instead, be firm and simply say: "The rule is that bedtime is at 7 p.m. Do you want to put on your pajamas yourself or do you want me to help you?"

Try to figure out which rules you care most about and stand up for them firmly. Have just a few important rules—there is no point to having many rules if you don't have the energy to follow through on them. Having rules that you do not consistently follow is confusing to a young child. It teaches her to ignore rules and to ignore you. But, when she is sick or hungry or very tired or is put in an unfamiliar environment, it is much harder for a young child to behave. Be more flexible and creative to help your child do what is expected.

When your child misbehaves, match your response to the behavior. For example, if children are fighting over a toy, remove the toy. If a child spills a drink, he is more likely to learn by having to help

clean up the mess than from being yelled at. These are responses to unwanted behaviors that make sense. They help children see the connections between actions and their consequences: Fighting about a toy leads to not having one to play with. Spilled juice takes time and effort to clean up.

Pointing out the consequences of a preschooler's behavior for others and for himself is also a helpful lesson. For example, "When you hit Charles it hurts him a lot. He doesn't want to play with children who hurt him. Instead, tell Charles in words that you are angry." This kind of response gives your child important information. It teaches him how his actions affect others and how to be responsible and get along in the world.

Sometimes young children misbehave because they need to feel like they have some control over the things they do. Parents who understand this let their children make some choices. They know that children will be more willing to let parents have control over some things if they have a say in other things.

Before giving your child a choice, be sure the choices she makes are ones you can live with. "Would you like to wear your green pants or your blue pants?" and "Would you like peanut butter and jelly for lunch or a hot dog?" are good choices for you to give your young child—unless you really want the child to wear the green pants or you just ran out of peanut butter. When you offer your child choices, it helps her feel that she has some say in her own life. Choices also give a child practice in making decisions for herself.

Finally, children learn from watching the people around them, especially their parents. You need to act the way that you want your child to act. A child will pick up on the language, the actions, and the attitudes of their parents and imitate them. If you want your children to behave politely and to respect others, then you must behave politely and respect others, especially your children.

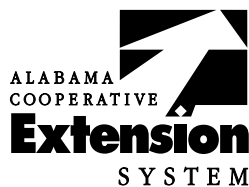
Parents Are Partners in Helping Children Behave

In a few short years, children grow from babies who are entirely dependent on their parents for their every need to talking, running, independent preschoolers. In spite of all this rapid growth, young children are only beginning to develop the skills to control their behavior. They have a lot to learn about how to control themselves. You need to be your child's partner in this process, patiently guiding and teaching as your child practices and develops these skills. Teaching young children how to behave is hard work. But the work you do now will pay off later in the form of youngsters who are responsible and caring people.

Other Readings of Interest

Extension publication HE-687, "Something Better Than Punishment."

Galinsky, Ellen, and Judy David (1988). *The Preschool Years*. New York: Times Books.



Your Experts for Life

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