

## New Principles of Parenting Series

# Something Better Than Punishment

► The Principles of Parenting series provides tips and information to support positive parenting and family relations.

If you are struggling to find effective ways to discipline your child, this publication will guide you through seven alternatives for dealing with children's misbehavior and avoiding punishment. Some typical conflict scenarios demonstrate how parents might deal with situations differently.

When we consider discipline, we may think of restricting activities, giving time-outs, and administering both verbal and physical punishment. It is also common for parents to get frustrated with their children and yell at them. Parents might say, "Do you want to get popped?" "I told you to stop!" "Be quiet!" "If you do that again, you will get a whupping!" Threats like these, however, can make children feel belittled and, even if they obey, cause them to feel angry with the parent for treating them this way. However, research shows that punishment loses its effect on children over time, causing parents to have to give more and more punishment to their children, and the effectiveness of punishment diminishes as children get older.



## Going Too Far: Is It Anger?

Sometimes, parents use punishment because they have become angry or frustrated with their children or some other situation. For example, spanking children in frustration or anger teaches them that violent acts or outbursts are acceptable ways to handle anger. Spanking or hitting can also suggest to children that violence is the first or only way to deal with problems or that it is okay for authority figures to use physical force to solve problems. If you say, "I'm only doing this for you!" consider what message you are sending about being responsible for your actions when you are angry.



### Reflect:

- When you were a child, what messages did you hear about spanking or other physical punishments?
- Are you using punishment out of frustration?

## Teaching Children

When a parent spanks a child for bad behavior, the parent may think that making the child suffer teaches him or her not to do bad things. However, it may do the opposite by making the child angry at you, especially if he or she feels that the punishment was not fair. Punishment does not teach the child how to problem-solve or how to deal with feelings, like boredom, jealousy, or frustration, that lead to misbehavior. Punishment may also make children feel unsafe to share or express these emotions, leading them to withhold feelings.

**Reflect:** It can be hard to parent, especially if we are doing it differently than our parents did. If punishment was the way you were brought up, you may not have a good idea about how to control your children's misbehavior without punishment. Parents can show, though, that people can work together to solve their problems without using physical means. Teaching means listening, modeling, or showing how to cope with situations through your actions. The following eight steps show you options for avoiding punishment.

### STEP 1. AVOID PUNISHMENT

The first step toward an alternative is to avoid the need for threatening punishment. In the following example, a problem and solutions are reviewed.

#### Scenario 1: Talking to a Neighbor

- Henry is getting the family ready to leave and starts talking to a neighbor. The children get restless and one of the children gets out. Henry yells at the child to stay in the car while he finishes talking to the neighbor.

What are some other ways to deal with this? Children, especially young children but also teenagers, have limited patience. The parent, Henry, is in control, though, both creating the situation and having the power to solve it. **Possible solutions:**

- Talk to the neighbor later.
- Tell the children he will be a minute, set a timer, and stick to his promise.
- If Henry anticipates a situation like needing to talk to the neighbor, he could be ready with something for the children to do while he talks.
- If Henry needs to talk longer and it is safe, he could let them play outside the car until he is ready to go.



All of these alternatives involve balancing the children's needs with the dad's needs. However, not dealing with the children likely involves threatening bored children to stay still.

#### Scenario 2: Don't Touch the Cake!

- If there is a cake on a table in view of a young, hungry child, the child is going to reach for the cake even if you tell the child not to. Instead of repeatedly telling the child to "Leave the cake alone," you have the power to solve the situation. You can move the cake. You can also recognize that the child is hungry and give them a healthy snack, such as apple slices. You could also try to distract the child with another activity.

### Think ahead:

1. What is one situation when you yell or threaten your children to obey?
2. What happened before that situation? What is happening for you? How does the child feel?
3. What is one way you could prepare ahead to help the child avoid misbehaving?

## STEP 2. KEEP IT SIMPLE: BE CAREFUL ABOUT YOUR RULES

The root of the word “discipline” is “disciple” or learner. If we make rules that are sensitive to the children’s age and ability, they can meet expectations. This is good teaching. Children will respect rules and see their family’s world as a safe place if the rules lead to peace. Sometimes, parents make too many rules. Parents can also give their children rules that can be hard for them to follow. Rules need to be appropriate for the age of the child. New rules can be a surprise and challenging for children to follow instantly.

Consider a trip to the grocery store. Parents can be tired, and kids can be restless. A parent may ask their two-year-old to sit in the grocery cart, be quiet, and not touch anything while she shops. These are three separate instructions. All three would be difficult or impossible for a two-year-old—and even a three-year-old—to sustain for a whole hour. It is more reasonable to think about what would help a child behave for their age. Here are some tips:

### “Do” Instead of “Don’t”

Simple rules are rules that apply to many situations. Simple rules also use “do” instead of “don’t.”

### Tips: Keep-It-Simple Rules

1. Be kind to others.
2. Share what you have.
3. Be on time.
4. Do your duty.

Each of these rules is a conversation opener. Instead of punishment, the parent can help the child figure out how to meet the expectation of a rule like “Doing your duty.” For example, if a child doesn’t do their chore, maybe it is because they can’t. Maybe another chore fits their abilities better. It may be that a favorite activity happens right after dinner and they can do a different

chore later, or homework must also be done. By exploring expectations together, the parent can help a child resolve the problem and show support, even while keeping rules. If the rules are specific instead of general, such as “If you don’t brush your teeth on time, you have to start earlier tomorrow night,” the parent gets trapped into micromanagement. With the specific approach, you are stuck with a rigid solution that will make you put your child to bed earlier. However, to support a child, you may need to help them understand that they still need to do their chore even if it is disappointing or frustrating.



**Reflect:** What are some ways you coax yourself when you have to do a chore you don’t want to do? Share your tips with your child and be a teacher.

### STEP 3. BE SMART: SAY “YES!”

It is common for parents to yell, “Don’t touch that!” “Leave your sibling alone” and “Go away.” However, using too many commands and threats may become background “noise,” especially with no follow-up. Children may also learn to assume that parents do not mean what they say. When parents shout commands, they may also miss important things children are trying to communicate, like discomfort, personal needs, or something that conflicts with a command.

The trick is that saying “No” is harder than saying “Yes.” Think about other ways to get to your goal. Can you flip the instruction?

#### Tip: Say “Yes” Instead of “No”

1. Instead of saying “Don’t touch that,” give the child something they CAN touch.
2. Instead of saying “Be quiet,” listen or have them read a story to you or record a story for later (and listen to it with them).
3. Instead of saying “Be still” at the grocery store, let a child hold purchases that will not get broken as they sit in the cart.

Guiding children by showing them what the right action is teaches them that you are paying attention to their needs but also maintaining rules. It also helps them learn to manage feelings such as boredom or frustration, which helps you manage difficult situations like grocery shopping.

### STEP 4. ENFORCE RULES CONSISTENTLY

When parents make rules that they do not enforce, children get the idea that parents are not serious about those rules. To be consistent, parents should avoid rules that are hard to enforce! When you keep rules simple, parents can make allowances for circumstances, like tiredness, the influence of other children who might be present, or family needs.

#### Scenario 3: The Candy Lane



Here, the parent is creating a situation when she attends to the children’s needs, helps them meet expectations, and shows them how to have fun at the same time. The parent is not “giving in.” She is showing the children that a parent is caring and loving but also setting the rules.

- When Claire went to the grocery store, her children would whine and cry for candy. Sometimes she would give them candy. Sometimes she would get angry. Claire needed an approach that would help her be consistent and calm. She decided that they were bored and that she should prepare a snack for the children to eat while they were in the store. She consistently held to this rule, and eventually, the children stopped begging for candy.



## STEP 5. USE CONSEQUENCES INSTEAD OF PUNISHMENT

Consequences are different from punishment. Punishments hurt a child and can make them angry, sad, or lonely. Consequences, on the other hand, can teach children that when they do a certain thing, a certain action will follow.

### Scenario 4: Setting Up Consequences

**Complex Rule:** Each of the children has assigned chores. If the children have not finished their chores by the time we sit down for dinner, they may not join us until the chores are finished.

While these instructions are clear, they also have three rules in them. Can you name the three rules? The rules also need to take into consideration how situations may change. You do not want to have to make exceptions because your children will notice and start to use excuses, making it more difficult for you to enforce.

**Parents need to ask themselves two questions:**

- Are you really, truly prepared to follow through?
- Are you prepared to help and support the child be successful?

It is not fun for any of us when the rules are too hard to follow, detailed, or rigid. Also, very young children may be unable to follow a rule by themselves. You can help younger children by working with them. When a child is old enough to comply on their own, you can help them with next steps by reminding them or even helping them find a way to finish. This will help them develop pride as they meet expectations instead of shame for failure.

**Remember:** It is better to keep the rules simple, like “Do your chores before dinner.”

Set the rule, and then enjoy helping your child move to success!

### Scenario 5: Late for School!

- Tomas had a hard time getting up on time for school. We were always shouting at him and threatening him. Finally, we helped him set an alarm that he liked. We agreed that if he missed the bus, he would not get to pick a treat for his lunch. Although we initially helped him by setting a special breakfast to motivate him, he was proud of doing it himself and became good at getting himself up on time after a couple of mistakes.



The child in this scenario must be old enough to dress himself, tell time, and do his chores without a reminder. Tomas is working on the last step, which is doing all these things on a schedule. It helps if the parent also follows a routine. Can you set breakfast out? Help the child lay out his clothes the night before? If you have a dawdler, a dreamy child, or one who skips steps, maybe he is not ready for independent self-organization. Everyone has different talents.

However, you can set a small natural consequence, if it is safe. Learning to use consequences effectively can take a lot of patience and be very difficult. Think of an appropriate consequence that will teach your child how pleased you are when he meets expectations. One small consequence might be that Tomas might not have everything he needs, such as his favorite pencil, when he gets to school. Help him problem-solve the next day. How can he be sure that he remembers? A consequence that is too big for Tomas might be being late for school, which might make him feel like a failure and could get him in trouble.

### Ask yourself:

- Are the consequences you have chosen natural, reasonable, and appropriate to what your child can control about his or her own actions and choices?
- Do the consequences allow you to avoid nagging and punishing?
- Do they help you create harmony?

**Warning:** Setting expectations that children are too young to achieve frustrates them and teaches them that they can never meet your expectations. Consequences must not be used if they put a child in danger. It is inappropriate to teach children the dangers of a hot stove or busy traffic by allowing them to touch the stove or wander into traffic. The objective of consequences is to allow children to see how their choices affect their lives. Learning how to use natural consequences may be one of the most important skills parents can learn, but consequences should not be used to punish.

## STEP 6. OFFER CHILDREN REAL CHOICES

Sometimes children resist their parents because they want to challenge them. This is a normal part of growing up. The task of childhood is learning to be independent. You are their first authority figure, so if they feel safe with you, they will say “No.” Saying “No” is a sign of their growing maturity. However, you must also teach them how to make appropriate choices, even when they don’t want to.

### Scenario 6: Bedtime Choices

- We used to have trouble getting Avery to go to bed. It helped to give her a choice. We asked, ‘Would you like Daddy to tuck you in or would you like Mommy to tuck you in?’ Sometimes we asked, ‘Would you like to pick a storybook for me to read to you, or would you like me to pick?’ If Avery did not want to go to bed, we repeated the question. If she still didn’t want to choose, we started the process of putting her to bed and talked to her about her day.

While these parents are giving their child a choice about the story and about who tucks them in, the secret message is that Avery does not have a choice about going to bed. Avery’s parents have given her acceptable choices (choosing a book and who tucks her in) but not the choice of whether or not to go to bed.

When parents give their children a reasonable choice, they are less likely to be angry or feel disrespected.

Parents need to adjust the choices that their children (and youth) are ready to make. If you feel uncertain about what is age appropriate, offer a compromise that satisfies your need to be the responsible adult and that protects them but allows them to experience a range of outcomes. For example, choosing one book at bedtime does not mean they get to have another and another afterward. One book (or two) is the limit.



## STEP 7. GIVE A LITTLE LOVE INSTEAD

Sometimes children act out because they want their parents to notice them. This is not wrong—we all need a little love sometimes. However, children are especially likely to act up for attention if it seems that acting up is the only way to get attention.

### Scenario 7: Young Child Is Acting Out

- Leo was always whining and often clung to his dad's leg. Sometimes his dad got angry because his little boy always wanted his attention. Finally, he yelled at him to grow up and stop being a baby.

As Leo's dad thought about this, he decided to change his approach. When his son pulled on his leg, he picked him up and talked to him. One day, he took Leo for a walk. Another day, he played a game with Leo.

When children want your love, they will be persistent. They are not being manipulative. When they consistently get the attention they want from you, they may not be anxious if you sometimes have to say "Not now." Leo might calm down if his dad can show him that he loves him by putting a comforting hand on him. Remember that very young children can only wait for about 2 to 3 minutes.

**Think:** What are some times that you need peace and quiet? What are some ways that you can comfort your child while giving yourself some peace?



How would you feel if Leo were a girl? Would it be easier to cuddle him? Boys need love too!

### Scenario 8: Nap Time

- Arianna could not get Megan to take her nap. Sometimes she would yell at or lock her in her room to get her to take a nap. But that only made Megan upset. Arianna felt bad about the conflict she and her daughter were having about naps. Arianna found that she could read Megan a story or start watching a movie while she held her. Megan would fall asleep without any battle. Arianna also decided it was okay if Megan just played quietly on her bed during rest time.



This mother learned how to get her daughter to rest without fighting with her. Letting your children "do it their way" lowers conflict and teaches them how to manage situations themselves. Allowing children meet expectations the way that makes sense to them helps you avoid getting caught up in enforcing rules with the only way left: force.

## STEP 8. TRY DISTRACTING THE CHILD

Sometimes, a child is doing something that can really bother a parent or siblings. Maybe you are irritated, tired, or have to get something done. A parent might react and yell at a child or threaten them to stop what they are doing. Instead of reacting, stop and think. You might need a break and you can all have one together. Or perhaps you could use one of the skills here to redirect the child to a new activity.

### Scenario 9: Noisy Child

- Sallie was making a lot of noise playing on the floor with pans. I can usually stand the noise, but one day it was driving me crazy. Rather than jerk the pans away from her, I got out the modeling clay, went to the table, and started making things with it. Sallie became interested and left the pans to join me.

Whose problem was this? The parent used self-awareness (they were getting annoyed) to focus on what the problem was for them. The problem was not that Sallie was playing, but that the noise was too much for some people (you, the parent). It is a teachable moment. This parent could have yelled at Sallie to be quiet, but instead, she diverted Sallie's energy and helped Sallie keep the family happy.

Your gratitude is all they need to feel important. The secret message was that the parent understood Sallie's happy moment of playing and welcomed the playful spirit, while helping Sallie be part of the team.



## Working with Children with Extra Needs

If your child has a frequent behavior problem that you cannot address with these ideas, something else may be involved.

1. Is the child in a stressful situation? Are they being bullied at school, or is your family experiencing disruption? Go easy, and ask them to share how they feel.
2. Does your child have difficulty following instructions? Make the steps easier and help them.
3. Are you and your coparenting partner on different pages? You might want to talk with a relationship counselor, even if you are the only parent who is attending.
4. Do you think your child has different learning needs? Talk to a skilled educator, school guidance counselor, or mentor.

Getting help before a behavioral problem becomes a relationship problem is wise.

## In Summary

Behavioral problems with children can lead to power struggles. The secret message of punishment is that you are more powerful than your children are. As they grow older, research shows that they obey less. However, being a coach or a teacher shows them that you are guiding them to be part of the team, and you are helping them meet expectations. To make the job easier, follow these tips:

- Avoid the need for rules.
- Keep the rules simple.
- Be smart: say “Yes” not “No.”
- Enforce rules consistently.
- Use consequences to build success.
- Give children appropriate choices.
- Keep it positive.
- Distract and meet everyone's needs.



These tips make it easier for children to follow the rules that you set. When rules are simple and your consequences are consistent and appropriate, children can trust that you have their best interests at heart. Helping your child learn that they can meet your expectations helps them feel that they matter. When your child meets expectations, they feel proud. They also feel close to you—and safe. When they do make big mistakes, the infrequent need for correction helps them understand it is important.

## Additional Information

- Young children: ZERO to THREE website.
- Spoiling children: Alabama Extension publication “Am I Spoiling My Child” (HE-0718).
- Parenting newsletters: Just in Time Parenting series ([www.jitp.info](http://www.jitp.info)) that provides developmentally appropriate tips for parenting young children from prenatal to age 5.

Todos los materiales están también en español [www.jitp.info/es](http://www.jitp.info/es). (These materials are also available in Spanish.)

- Co-parenting: Alabama Extension publication “Guide to Being a Better Co-Parent” (FCS-2735)
- Other parenting issues and concerns: Alabama Extension website at [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu).





Revised by **Briana Powell**, Undergraduate Research Assistant, Psychology; **Silvia L. Vilches**, *Extension Specialist*, Assistant Professor, Family and Child Development; **Synithia Flowers**, *Regional Extension Agent*, Human Sciences; **Jenna Wettstein**, Student, Psychology; **Allie Merritt**, Graduate Student, Social Work and Social Indicators Lab Coordinator, all with Auburn University. Originally written by **H. Wallace Goddard**, former *Extension Specialist*, and revised by **Ellen Abell**, former *Extension Specialist*, both with Auburn University.

**For more information**, contact your county Extension office. Visit [www.aces.edu/directory](http://www.aces.edu/directory).

In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex (including gender identity and sexual orientation), age, disability, and reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity.

Program information may be made available in languages other than English. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, and American Sign Language) should contact the Alabama Cooperative Extension System Human Resources Department at (334) 844-5531 or the State of Alabama Governor's Office on Disability (GOOD) at (888) 879-3582 or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720- 2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339.

To file a program discrimination complaint, a complainant should complete a Form AD-3027, USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, which can be obtained online at [www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-program-discrimination-complaint-form.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-program-discrimination-complaint-form.pdf) from any USDA office, by calling (866) 632- 9992, or by writing a letter addressed to USDA. The letter must contain the complainant's name, address, telephone number, and a written description of the alleged discriminatory action in sufficient detail to inform the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (ASCR) about the nature and date of an alleged civil rights violation. The completed AD-3027 form or letter must be submitted to USDA by: U.S. Department of Agriculture | Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights | 1400 Independence Avenue, SW | Washington, D.C. 20250- 9410 | Fax: (833) 256-1665 or (202) 690-7442; or Email: [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov).

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

Revised June 2023, HE-0687

© 2023 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.

[www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu)