

# FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 43

(04/01)

## DISCIPLINE

Children do not always do what parents want. When a child misbehaves, the parent must decide how to respond. All children need rules and expectations to help them learn appropriate behavior. How does a parent teach a child the rules and, when those rules are broken, what should parents do?

Parents should begin by talking to each other about how they want to handle discipline and establish the rules. It is important to view discipline as teaching not punishment. Learning to follow rules keeps a child safe and helps him or her learn the difference between right and wrong.

Once rules have been established, parents should explain to the child that broken rules carry consequences. For example, *Here are the rules. When you follow the rules, this will happen and if you break a rule, this is what will happen.* Parents and the child should decide together what the rewards and consequences will be. Parents should always acknowledge and offer positive reinforcement and support when their child follows the rules. Parents must also follow through with an appropriate consequence when the child breaks a rule. Consistency and predictability are the cornerstones of discipline and praise is the most powerful reinforcer of learning.

Children learn from experience. Having logical consequences for misbehavior helps them learn that they are accountable for their actions, without damaging their self-esteem. If children are fighting over the television, computer or a video game, turn it off. If a child spills milk at the dinner table while fooling around, have the child clean it up. A teenager who stays up too late may suffer the natural consequences of being tired the next day. Another type of consequence that can be effective is the suspension or delay of a privilege. If a child breaks the rule about where they can go on their bike, take away the bike for a few days. When a child does not do chores, he or she cannot do something special like spend the night with a friend or rent a videotape.

There are different styles and approaches to parenting. Research shows that *effective* parents raise well-adjusted children who are more self-reliant, self-controlled, and positively curious than children raised by parents who are punitive, overly strict (authoritarian), or permissive. Effective parents operate on the belief that both the child and the parent have certain rights and that the needs of both are important. Effective parents don't need to use physical force to discipline the child, but are more likely to set clear rules and explain why these rules are important. Effective parents reason with their children and consider the youngsters' points of views even though they may not agree with them.

Tips for effective discipline:

- Trust your child to do the right thing within the limits of your child's age and stage of development.
- Make sure what you ask for is reasonable.

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- Speak to your child as you would want to be spoken to if someone were reprimanding you. Don't resort to name-calling, yelling, or disrespect.
- Be clear about what you mean. Be firm and specific.
- Model positive behavior. “Do as I say, not as I do” seldom works.
- Allow for negotiation and flexibility, which can help build your child's social skills.
- Let your child experience the consequences of his behavior.
- Whenever possible, consequences should be delivered immediately, should relate to the rule broken, and be short enough in duration that you can move on again to emphasize the positives.
- Consequences should be fair and appropriate to the situation and the child's age.

Parenting classes and coaching can be helpful in learning to be an effective parent. If parents have serious concerns about continuing problems with their child's behavior, consultation with a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other qualified mental health professional may be helpful.

For additional information see *Your Child (1998 Harper Collins)/Your Adolescent (1999 Harper Collins)*, and the Facts for Families: #22 Normality, #24 Know When to Seek Help for Your Child, #25 Know Where to Seek Help for Your Child, #44 Lying, #52 Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluation, and #72 Children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

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