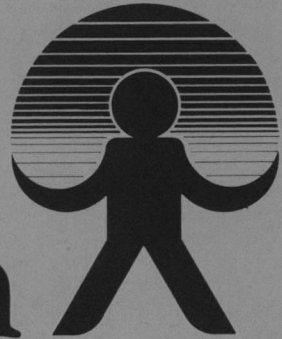


EM 8256 • Reprinted March 1991

Oregon's Children



Letters for parents of preschoolers: Letter 2

Oregon's Children

Oregon State University Extension Service



Disciplining Preschoolers Letter 2

Disciplining Preschoolers

Few parents can honestly say they never have trouble getting their children to "mind." Most admit they've lost their "cool" from time to time and don't know what to do when methods they've heard or read about fail to work with their youngsters. Many parents have no problem teaching children to avoid danger but find it hard to establish rules for everyday living.

Experts agree that the goal of rearing children is to help them learn useful behaviors. The old methods used to make children stop "bad" behavior are being replaced by understanding what's happening within a child and then guiding their natural interests and drive. Parents can now know what to expect at each age. But even that knowledge does not come with a set of instructions because every child and situation is different. Some child-rearing suggestions make parents feel more comfortable and make growing up easier for children.

Much of a three- or four-year-old's behavior troubles are due to poor memory. Although memory is steadily improving, they happily get into situations without remembering past experiences or consequences. They remember only a few words or ideas when someone is talking to them and have difficulty recalling what happened this morning or yesterday.

Their short memory makes them unable to follow many instructions given at the same time. Don't be surprised if Judy does not follow all your instructions when you say, "Take those toys upstairs to your room, put on your pajamas, brush your teeth, and hurry up!" Judy will probably brush her teeth thinking she has done what she was told. Being told too much, too fast, is upsetting to a child. Children are more likely to follow short, simple one-step-at-a-time instructions.



What Is Discipline?

Many parents feel uncomfortable with the word discipline because it recalls resentment and frustration from their childhood. It's often thought of as payment for being "naughty."

The word discipline refers to instructions and knowledge. Discipline is teaching children the rules people live by. It's also helping them learn and practice these rules. Discipline makes you get to work on time, drivers stay on the right side of the street, and children wash before eating. It's not a negative thing you do to children when they make mistakes.

There are two simple things children must learn: how to use desirable behavior and how to avoid undesirable behavior. What you as a parent have on your side is a child's natural desire to please you. Desirable behavior is most easily and rapidly learned when it is recognized and rewarded with special attention and affection. Desirable behavior that has been praised tends to be repeated because children love the grown-up, important way it makes them feel. Undesirable behavior is repeated, too, if that's the only way a child can get your attention.

Think of discipline as loving actions you take to teach your children to:

- achieve for themselves
- choose desirable behavior when you aren't around
- develop pride and pleasure in doing what is right and acceptable.

Showing your love is the first step in teaching effective discipline. As children become active preschoolers, many busy parents tend to forget to continue the playful, loving exchanges enjoyed with them as babies and toddlers. They neglect the secret of successful discipline—creating loving moments more often than corrective ones. Special outings, hugging, and playing or reading together always improves a child's efforts to please you. Yelling, blaming, lecturing, or belittling criticism often used to shock or shame children into desira-

ble behavior has not proven to work that way. This reduces a child's sense of accomplishment and self-worth. It doesn't make you feel successful as a parent either.

Three discipline styles used by parents are reflected in children's behavior and self-confidence:

Rigid enforcement teaches obedience and conformity to strict rules and standards through fear of punishment or shame. Preschoolers are very sensitive to disapproval whether it comes from discouraging words, frowns, harsh voices, or physical punishment. Unrelenting discipline reduces children's curiosity, spirit of adventure, and ability to make decisions on their own. They learn more about what they should **not** do than what they should do.

Permissive discipline lets children rear themselves through trial and error. Without the security of limitations and parental guidance, children are less able to direct or control their inner urges.

Developmental discipline uses methods that are firm or permissive depending on the seriousness of a child's mistakes. It considers the age, maturity, and temperament of each child. Developmental discipline recognizes that children do not know what is desirable behavior and that learning is a slow process. Parents using this style support their children with encouragement for what is done well.

Where does punishment fit into effective discipline? Effective discipline teaches children to decide what is desirable behavior and practice it because it feels right. The purpose of punishment is to stop children from doing what you don't want them to do.

Punishment may be physical like slapping, spanking, or any attack on a child's body. It can also be verbal such as shaming or ridiculing. Physical punishment stops children from doing what they are now doing, but it fails to guide them toward desirable behavior. A swat on the seat may be necessary to remind a toddler to stay out of the street or away from other dangerous temptations. While this mild punishment may do no harm, it cannot be used as an effective teaching method for preschoolers who should be helped to develop inner controls for their behavior.

Physical or verbal punishment teaches children to hate themselves and others. They think something is wrong with them because they are treated this way. Parents who use physical or verbal punishment are teaching children that it's all right to settle conflicts with hitting or name calling. Educators say that harsh punishment produces some of the unhappiest, least-controlled teenagers.

Parents who frequently rely on punishment for teaching desirable behavior usually think nothing

else works. It also works fast, while effective discipline takes imagination and time. Sometimes punishment is used because they are overburdened by a child's demands and punishing relieves their tensions.

You may ask, "What's wrong with spanking?" It's not a question of right or wrong but what is best for the child. Ask yourself, "How did I feel when I was spanked as a child?"

What's A Parent To Do?

Set limits. Every parent is not equally comfortable with all methods of discipline, but children need to know how far they can go. Limits allow children freedom to make decisions within given boundaries. To go no farther than the edge of the sidewalk is a set limit. Freedom and limits are different for each child at each age.

Too many limits and rules are confusing and make it hard for children to succeed. They also require constant supervision which is tiresome for parents. Most important is that there are limits. Set limits after you answer these questions:

- Is this limit necessary for the child's safety?
- Is it necessary for the safety and well-being of others? Is it mentally or physically harmful?
- Is it necessary for the protection of furnishings or other people's things?
- Is this limit necessary now or was it outgrown?
- Is this limit mostly for the comfort of adults such as too many naps, noise, or mess?
- Does this limit stop children from satisfying natural curiosity or activity needs?

Sometimes you'll set limits without thinking about the reason for the limit or what the results are. Some parents say "no" to almost everything. If children must stay in the yard, is there something to do there? If they cannot cross the street, how can they play with children in another yard?

Not all limits need to be explained to very young children but preschoolers need to know reasons for limits. They can help you think of reasons for a limit and help you set some. You could talk about what would happen if everybody jumped on the sofa. What kinds of things can children do while riding in a car? They won't always agree or remember, but it's grown-up to be helping with family decisions.

Be a model. Few parents realize they are constantly being copied. If you yell and call Mary a brat for snatching baby's teddy bear, Mary learns to yell and call people names when things don't go her way. If you teach them not to hit the baby by hitting

them, you are showing that it's all right for grown-ups to hit people. If your table manners are good, you eat all kinds of foods, and you hang up your coat, children will imitate you. Maybe not now but eventually.

Use natural consequences. Natural consequences are actions taken when children fail to control urges to misbehave. A natural consequence relates to a child's mistake. You may deprive children of a promised trip to the park if they don't eat their lunch. The two situations are unrelated. For natural consequences to be effective discipline it would be better to warn your children there will be no snacks at the park. Then stick by that statement. Hunger will be the natural reminder to eat lunch next time.

Natural consequences are most effective if they occur immediately. If you say, "Wait till your father comes home," most children will forget what the mistake was by the time he gets there. The consequence becomes unrelated to the deed.

Why Children Misbehave

Much child behavior considered "naughty" or "bad" is best thought of as learning behavior. Good discipline is accepting what is natural and will be outgrown. Babies are excused for impolite burping and spitting. But life gets harder for three-year-olds who kick and hit, or throw fits of temper. Fours and fives have different troubles. They experiment with language that comes out as sass, balkiness, or name calling.

Your children's goals are different from yours. They act out impulses you have already conquered, like banging on Grandma's piano or whining for gum when you're at the store. A three-year-old mind is only beginning to absorb all the information it needs to behave well in many different situations. That's why you point out and compliment desirable behavior again and again.

Almost all parents are irritated when preschoolers waste time in routine tasks, ignore parental requests, leave tasks unfinished, and wiggle a lot in sitting situations like restaurants. Never expect children to act like adults. Most of the time they will be acting like normal three-, four-, or five-year-olds.

Desirable behavior is best taught when things are going well, not when things are at their worst; children often misbehave when something is bothering them.

Children misbehave when they don't feel well. Children need plenty of sleep, healthy foods, exercise, and fresh air every day. They're hard to live with when they don't get it. If you rule out sickness, your children may need time outdoors or a snack to hold them over until the next meal. Trying to teach desirable behavior now would be useless.

Children misbehave because they lack knowledge and experience. They make mistakes when they are learning new things but haven't learned how or when the new things are appropriate. Three-year-olds learn to spit but need to learn to spit outdoors, not at others. Four- and five-year-olds learn shocking words but have to discover you don't use them in social situations. Children make behavior mistakes just as they make mistakes getting their shoes on the right feet. Some mistakes call for patient explanations, others are best ignored.

Children misbehave when they are upset. Children need order and routine to feel secure. They are upset by a new babysitter, a new baby, a sick parent, a family move, parent squabbles, divorce, or death. Just when your energies are focused on resolving changes, children want and need more attention because they, too, feel insecure.

Children misbehave when they are discouraged. What's the use of doing good things if no one notices? Sometimes families make a habit of giving mistakes all the attention. Without regular approval and praise for desirable behavior, your children may think the only way to get attention is by misbehaving. Negative attention seems better than none at all. Kind words encourage, scoldings discourage.

Children misbehave when they feel rejected. All humans crave love and acceptance and want it shown toward them. Feelings of rejection or of being unloved cause children to strike out with destructive or angry action. The feelings may come from harsh words or even having a new baby in the home. Older preschoolers may think they are being treated unfairly. Talking about the problem and showing extra affection usually helps.

There may be other reasons for misbehaving, but it's easier to attend to what's bothering a preschooler now than later with a teenager. Steady guidance and their maturing nature eventually ends the toy snatching, truth stretching, tattling, and demands for attention you now deal with. But they will test you, rebel, or forget the rules many times before they learn how to control themselves.

Prepared by Marcelle Straatman, Extension human development specialist, School of Home Economics.

Dear Parents: While there are many theories about disciplining children, most parents hope they are acting in the best interest of their children. One way to provide your children with experiences to help them develop good judgment and responsibility is to think before you act. Also, daily praise the many good things they do. For more ideas we suggest the publication, *Child Guidance Techniques*, PNW 64, available from your county Extension office.

Sincerely,

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