

Using Discipline Constructively

I am, indeed, a king, because I know how to rule myself.

—Pietro Aretino

Discipline is needed. There is no doubt about that. Society couldn't exist if people acted without regard for others. Why, then, is there so much disagreement about this subject?

One reason is that many people don't understand what discipline means. The word "discipline" comes from "disciple," someone who follows the teachings of another. Discipline, therefore, is a learning experience, not punishment nor tears, but a chance to learn how to live in a social world.

Goals of discipline



What are you teaching when you discipline? Self-discipline.

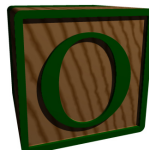
Discipline should help children take over the responsibility for their own behavior.

They have to learn to rely on themselves rather than on you or other adults to tell them what to do.

While children are still learning self-control, they need to be protected from hurting themselves and other people. They have to be shown how to behave in appropriate ways.

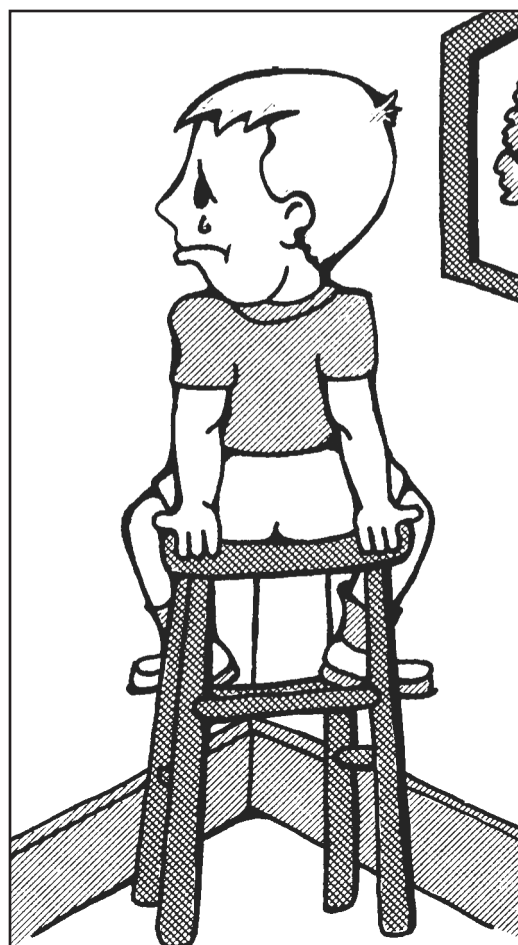
The short-term goal of discipline, then, is to control children's behavior while explaining what is appropriate behavior on a daily basis.

Causes of problem behavior



Often in working toward these long- and short-term goals, it helps to look for the causes behind your children's behavior.

There are usually good reasons why they act the way they do. In fact, when they misbehave, they often are trying to accomplish things you want for them: to be independent, express feelings, or learn new skills, for example.



The next time your child misbehaves, ask yourself these questions:

- Am I expecting my child to do more than he or she is capable of?
- Are his or her possessions or feelings of self-worth being threatened?
- Is he or she trying to learn something or practicing a new skill?

You don't have to like all your child's behavior. But by understanding the causes behind it, you are likely to find an effective technique for changing it.

Constructive discipline

There is no one right way to discipline. Rather, there is a variety of techniques that can stop misbehavior and at the same time encourage self-discipline. Some of the choices available to you are:

- Let your child make some decisions and choices.
- Give reasons for your rules.
- Take your child away from trouble.
- Redirect the child.
- Let your child learn from the results of misbehavior.
- Punish the child by taking away privileges.

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If punishment is used too often it can lose its effectiveness and may even have negative side effects. It can arouse anger or cause the child to forget why he or she was punished in the first place.

Don't be surprised if children sometimes repeat misbehavior. Just keep trying, keeping in mind your long- and short-term goals and the different techniques available to you, as discussed below.

Discipline techniques



What techniques you choose will depend upon you, your child, and the particular situation. In general, younger children need more direct control. As they grow older, you can make more use of reasons, choices, and natural outcomes. Here are some examples of various techniques.

Let the child make some decisions and choices. The best way to teach responsibility is to give the child as much as possible.

June helps plan her third birthday party with her mother. Mrs. Hamning asks June to decide whether they should serve lemonade or fruit juice.

Jon, a 5-year-old, is taking a bath and splashing water all over. His father asks, "Do you want to close the shower curtain now or wipe up the water when you finish?"

Give reasons for your rules. Let the child know why something must be or can't be done. Understanding the reasons for rules makes it easier to remember them.

On the way to the park, 3-year-old Larry runs toward the street. His father yells at him and pulls him back, then explains what might have happened if Larry had run into the street and why he must look both ways first.

As she is paying for her purchases at the drug store, Mrs. Sanchez sees an elderly lady trying to open the door. She tells 5-year-old Maria to open the door. Maria is looking at toys and doesn't want to go. Mrs. Sanchez explains that the woman is not strong enough to open the door and that people have to help each other out.

Take him or her away from trouble. If a child is too young to understand, or there is no way to change the cause, it may be easier to change the situation:

Nine-month-old Sacha crawls after lamp cords, ash trays, and other dangerous items. Her parents remove such items from her reach.

Two-year-old Tommy starts crying when his older sisters will not let him join their tea party. His father takes him into the other room and plays a game with him.

Redirect the child. Look at what he or she is trying to do. Often you can find a way to let the child do it in a better place or a safer way:

Eighteen-month-old Jesse loves to knock over his cup of milk or juice and watch how it spills. His father puts him in the bathtub and gives him containers to pour water in and out.

When Mr. Smith takes 1-year-old Jennifer with him to the grocery store, she reaches for everything on the shelves. Now Mr. Smith always gives her one or two of the colorful boxes from his cart to look at and handle.

Let him or her learn from the results. When he or she is old enough to understand, and the results won't be dangerous, experience can be the best teacher:

Mrs. Barry warns 3-year-old Paula that if she keeps banging her toy truck it will break. Paula keeps banging the truck. It breaks.

Every time they go somewhere, Mr. Washington has to hurry Michael along and help him finish dressing. One day as they are getting ready to go swimming, he does not nag Michael. They miss the bus and have to walk in the hot sun.

Punish the child. Punishment is the removal of pleasant experiences. Some forms of punishment may be appropriate in certain situations:

Six-month-old Chad crawls up to a pair of hot tongs near the outdoor grill and starts to touch them. Ms. Walker scolds him, saying, "No, no! Hot, hot!"

Three-year-old Laura keeps throwing sand at her friends after Mrs. Walters tells her to quit. Mrs. Walters removes Laura from the interaction and from her toys, and leaves her alone in her room for 5 minutes.

Mr. Holbrook has told Peter several times not to ride his bicycle in the street. Peter rides out into the street again. Mr. Holbrook tells Peter that he may not ride his bicycle for a week.

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