

Positive Strategies to Guide Child Behavior

Many parents find themselves struggling with their child's challenging behavior at some point. Sometimes even the simplest of requests or directions can suddenly spin out of control. The good news is there are effective discipline strategies that can be used to create positive solutions.

Tip #1: Keep Your Expectations Realistic. It is important for you to know and understand your child's abilities and limitations. Expecting too much or too little from your child can lead to problems and frustrations for you both. A three year old child cannot be expected to spend very much time in a shopping mall or other over-stimulating environments. When they become fussy is your signal it is time to leave.

Tip #2: Plan Ahead. Try to anticipate what your child may do or need in various situations. Make sure you plan ahead to set your child up for successful experiences. Don't plan outings during nap time or mealtime (unless eating is on the agenda). Or, consider asking your child to be a part of the planning process. No matter their age, all children like to know what's to be expected of them. Hope for the best, but plan for the worst. Always have a back-up plan!

Tip #3: Clearly State Your Expectations in Advance. Some undesirable behavior occurs because your child can't act differently or simply doesn't want to act differently. Either way it helps to remember that your child can't read your mind. Be sure to give your child one clear instruction so he knows what you want him to do. Especially before going into a new situation, talk through the experience with your child, explaining how you expect him to behave.

Tip #4: Offer Limited, Reasonable Choices. Most children are not born with the built-in ability to make decisions and then accept the consequences. In order for your child to learn to take personal responsibility, give plenty of support and practice. Allow them to make choices where either decision is acceptable. For example, "Do you want to put your shoes on or do you want me to help you put your shoes on?" or "Do you want to load the dishwasher or take out the trash?" If they say no, you can say "No at this moment is not an option. Please pick one choice, or I will pick for you."

Tip #5: Use Neutral Time. Neutral time cannot be found in the middle of a difficult situation filled with strong feelings. Instead, it's when everyone is calm enough to think, talk and listen. Don't just pretend the difficult situation didn't happen. Take time to talk about what happened and positive ways to handle problems in the future.

Tip #6: Catch Your Child Being Good. How much time do you spend telling your child what he should not do? Instead, try giving specific, positive attention to behavior you want to see again and again. Be sure to say “thank you” as often as you can. When a preschooler waits a minute or two say, “Thank you for being patient. I appreciate that.”

Tip #7: Stay Calm. When your child’s behavior is unacceptable, you can choose to either respond to it or ignore it. If a reaction is required, acting calm with a minimum of attention reduces the risk of strengthening the very behavior you wish to discourage. Remember, you are modeling desired behavior. When you remain calm, your child learns appropriate ways to respond to difficult situations.

Tip #8: Use “When . . . Then Statements”. A “when . . . then” statement is a simple instruction that tells your child what he must do in order to earn a desired consequence (what he wants to do). Give your statement a positive focus. State it only once and set a reasonable time limit. Follow through and be prepared for your child’s response – it may be “NO”. “When you get your shoes on, we can go to the park” or “When you come late, then you lose car privilege for the week” or “When you yell at me, then we need stop, take a five minute break and come back after having a chance to cool off”

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