

Practical tips on how to approach discipline in children

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Abstract:

In this article, we try to review the important aspects of discipline in children and focus on tips that help parents achieve success in this regard. We hope this article helps all parents as well as the pediatricians and GPs who have to advise parents on such issues in day to day practice.

Practical tips on how to approach discipline in children

We are going through a major worldwide crisis, and a significant resetting of how we function in our day to day routines. Many families are getting to spend more time with their children, and they are also facing difficulties due to the change in routine (e-learning vs school learning, more time at school, less physical play leading to more screentime, increasing levels of frustration in children provoking more tantrums etc. So, we consider this an ideal opportunity for parents to look into the concept of discipline. We have summarized some key steps that will help this process.

What is discipline?

'Discipline' is an often misunderstood or misinterpreted word in parenting context. With the dictionaries listing its meanings such as 'Punishment' or 'Control', the word 'Discipline' is often misunderstood by parents. In the context of parenting, Discipline can be looked at as the training of rules and routines about acceptable/desirable or unacceptable/undesirable behaviours. Behavior theory's positive-negative reinforcement techniques are used in disciplining. Positive behavior followed by positive consequence is reinforced and negative behavior followed by negative consequence is avoided.

This training for a young child usually begins at home from parents and care-takers; then it continues further by teachers, and also, by various individuals (family or friends) they come across over the course of life. The rules, routines and training methods will keep changing as per the age, maturity, cultural or family norms. These rules and routines promoting desirable behaviour are supposed to become part of the trained individual's make-up, serving as a self-guidance system. The main goal behind this process is to make the individual practice behaviours that will make him/her happy, healthy, productive, and self-reliant.

Tips to successful disciplining of children:

1. Understand 'parenting style'

With a good balance of affection and authority, authoritative parenting style works the best. Here the word 'Authority' is

about setting up clear system of expectations and consequences about desirable and undesirable behaviours.

Permissive parenting, with affection sidelining authority; and Authoritarian parenting, with excess authority leaving affection little place, are parenting styles to be avoided.

2. Understand the 'temperament' of the child.

Temperament is the basic behavioural style of the individual, which determines the common patterns of body rhythm, mood, adaptation to people/situations and emotional responses. 40% children are easy-going, 10% slow to warm up, 10% difficult and the rest a mix of these different traits.

3. Understand that each child is unique!

Tailor disciplining approach as per the age, personality, and temperament, understanding and respecting unique strengths and weaknesses.

4. Start early.

By the second half of infancy, the baby starts to acquire various physical, emotional, cognitive, and speech-related skills, and starts exploring them. The growing-developing infant and toddler may start indulging in things like pushing, pulling, throwing, scratching, shouting or using bad words.

Showing parental approval or disapproval for desirable-undesirable behaviours through facial gestures or simple verbal commands needs to start at this stage itself.

5. Learn to say 'No' for right reason, and accept momentary crying!

Many parents avoid saying 'No' for their young children's undesirable acts and demands, in order to avoid making them cry or feel disappointed. This misplaced love fosters misbehaviors. Facing parental disapproval or rejection for undesirable behaviours, and learning to handle the resultant dejections and disappointments is an important process in positive disciplining of children.

3. Set clear limits and guidelines.

Identify the desirable behaviors in terms of attitude, manners, communication, socialization, core values and general lifestyle (hygiene, sleep, physical activity, digital use). Set clear limits and guidelines in these areas. Work on developing mental resilience, the ability of the mind to bounce back from adversity.

7. Be inclusive and flexible.

Rather than commanding, offer limited choices of desirable

- behaviours to make the children feel included in the process. Disciplining is a continuous process and needs to be recalibrated often.
8. **Creative communication**
Communicating with children is an art. Use creativity and humor to get your points across, rather than long-winding logical explanations.
 9. **Consistency and fairness**
Practice disciplining measures consistently and fairly, not making confusing variations as per the mood or preference for specific family members.
 4. **Teamwork**
Parents and all family members should work as a team with common goals. They should be on the same page about the disciplining rules, routines and strategies. Healthy discussions and debates are to be encouraged, and conflicts resolved amicably.
 5. **Positive parental role model**
Imitation comes naturally to children, and that's why setting up a positive parental role model about the desirable habits and behaviours is more likely to yield good results.
 6. **Delayed gratification**
Instead of immediately providing gratification for the child's material demands, teach them to let go of the temptation of the immediate small reward and to be able wait and work for a later greater reward.
The famous 'Marshmallow Test' experiment (where a child is offered a marshmallow and is told that s/he could either have 1 now or 2 later after waiting for 15 minutes) showed that the children who chose delayed gratification showed better health, happiness and academic/professional success as adults.
 13. **Encouragement**
Encouraging good, desirable behaviours immediately through words (like 'Well-done' or 'Keep it up!') or gestures such as a pat on the head/back/shoulder, claps or high five is a positive reinforcement strategy.
Identify and point out the positive behavior immediately to make it effective.
 14. **No violent punishments**
Punishment in the traditional sense, is an obsolete strategy in discipline.
Physical punishments do not induce a long-term positive behavioural change and besides the potential for physical injuries, also foster a wrong belief that 'It is okay to hit other person'.
Verbal punishments like shouting or emotional punishment like threats or blackmail scar the minds.
 15. **Distraction**
It is the strategy to switching the child's mind from a negative behaviour to positive behaviour by offering constructive engagement through an interesting object or an activity.
e.g. Offering a toy or a game or an enjoyable activity (paper-crayons) to a toddler/pre-schooler throwing a tantrum.
 16. **Ignoring (extinction)**
Ignoring the frequent, annoying and relatively harmless

negative behaviour, removes attention and reinforcement. Useful in toddlers' and preschoolers' temper tantrums, whining or crying for no reason.

Initially the intensity and frequency of misbehavior may increase for weeks but later it subsides.

17. **Timeouts**
Sending an out of control kid on a Timeout (in a safe, solitary space); 1 min per year of age after the age of 2 years is a popular strategy. Some experts recommend a quiet boring place for timeout, while some suggest making it a positive time-out (a small cool-down corner with a beanbag or a chair, few books or pictures, a squishy squeeze-ball, paper-pencil-crayons etc.) Useful to calm down an agitated child in toddler-pre-school age-groups, and make him/her reflect.
18. **Delaying or Taking away privileges**
Showing negative consequences of bad behaviour is the strategy used here for negative reinforcement of misbehaviors. (e.g. taking away a toy for a day for destructive play or fights over its use in younger children.
For older age children, taking away privileges like a favourite book/game/gadget or a playing or going-out opportunity or pocket-money works in the same manner.
19. **Keep cool; find 'Me'-time!**
Handling and grooming children is a challenging task, and can take serious physical, emotional and financial toll on parents. Parents should not lose their cool, and always keep enough 'Me' time for rest, recuperation and recreation, to recharge.
20. **Seek expert guidance SOS.**
If the disciplining children is becoming an arduous overwhelming task, try and consult an expert. A pediatrician will be the first support line, and if needed, he may refer you to other experts like a child psychologist.
We hope that these steps help parents as well as physicians guiding parents on how to approach discipline in children.

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Dr. Mandar V. Bichu is a senior pediatrician and an alumnus of Mumbai University's Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Medical College, where he completed his MBBS, Diploma of Child Health and MD(ped). After a short working stint in Mumbai's KJ Somaiya Medical College, he arrived in UAE, where he has worked in various government and private medical institutes since last 27 years.

He is also an acclaimed author, journalist and public speaker. He has a special interest in parent education, and has founded a special outreach program- Right Parenting.

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"What it's like to be a parent: It's one of the hardest things you'll ever do, but in exchange, it teaches you the meaning of unconditional love." - Nicholas Sparks