POSITIVE DISCIPLINE FOR TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS

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It's a delicate balancing act: keeping your young child's behavior in reasonable bounds without stifling curiosity, teaching violence or damaging self esteem. Positive discipline methods give toddlers and preschoolers the freedom they need to explore, develop and thrive, plus the security of knowing that a trusted parent is in control.

Using these methods does not mean, of course, that your child will always smilingly comply with your wishes. But when you've learned the secret of keeping your cool while standing your ground, those inevitable challenges and conflicts will be easier to handle.

Before taking a look at some specific techniques, it's important to consider how much can reasonably be expected of young children. For example, it's not fair to punish a toddler for saying "no" to you. It's a normal developmental characteristic, and simply the best way he knows to show that he's his own person, with thoughts and desires different from yours. So, a good response to a toddler's assertive "no" is to let him know that you accept his feelings, and then re-word things so you can both "win". An example might sound like this: "Wow, you're so excited about playing with your new truck that you really don't want to leave right now, do you? O.K., you can push your truck all the way to the bookcase and then hop on my back and we'll be off like the wind!"

Similarly, many parents feel frustrated when their efforts to teach their young child to share are making very slow progress. It may help to understand that the child's reluctance to share is the natural result of being too young to comprehend another person's point of view. When you know this, you can continue to work on learning to share, but with much more patience.

It's also useful to realize that most toddlers and many preschoolers simply do not have very much ability to control their impulses, even when they know what they are supposed to do, or not do. Expecting your young child to automatically obey simply because he is told to do something is most likely to cause anger and stress for you and frustration for your child.

When it seems that words are not enough, some parents back up their commands with a hand slap or a spank. Spanking may sometimes seem to work at the moment, but in the long run, it is not a very effective form of discipline. Its most lasting lesson is to teach children that hitting other people is okay if you're more powerful than they are. Additionally, spanking tends to make children more aggressive toward other people.

The following positive discipline techniques are effective alternatives to use with young children. The first three techniques (childproofing, setting ground rules and encouraging with praise) should be done in times of calm. Taking the time to implement these ideas when your child is not acting up will greatly reduce the time you spend using the other six techniques to deal with unacceptable behavior. And let's face it, it's much easier and more pleasant to avoid a battle with your child than to try to win one.

TECHNIQUES TO PREVENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS...

Childproof:
Young children are born with a healthy curiosity, and they need the freedom to safely explore their surroundings to discover what their world is all about. It's important not to inhibit this natural curiosity by constantly reprimanding your child for touching things around the house.

Childproofing (placing all dangerous or breakable items out of reach) reduces stress for both parents and
children. Your child won't have to hear "no" all the time, and you will have more peace of mind knowing that he's not getting into things he shouldn't. Also, if you use the word "no" sparingly, your child will be more likely to pay attention when you do say it. For example, there may be one or two forbidden household items you will not be able to remove, and you can save your firm "no" for when your child heads toward these specific objects.

Set Ground Rules:
You'll also find you won't have to say "no" so often when you have clear ground rules. Make a list of no more than four or five basic rules, worded as simply and positively as possible. Plan to "help" your child follow the rules whenever necessary. For example, if a rule is "We touch the cat gently," you could guide the child's hand to softly pet the cat.

Encourage with Praise:
In this method, you focus on your child's good behavior by telling her why you like what she did. Sometimes we spend so much time telling children what is unacceptable that we forget to tell them about the kind of behavior we like to see. A very effective way to praise is to actually describe her good actions in some detail so she knows you are really paying attention to what she has done. At other times, a smile, a pat on the back or a simple "Thank you" will do.

When we are praising a child, we should be careful not to label her. Instead of saying "good girl" or "bad girl," we should say "good job" or "I like the way you shared those crackers." Every child should feel that she is inherently a good person, so don't want her to get the idea she is only a "good" child when she does things you like. Help her learn that only her actions are sometimes good and sometimes not such a good choice. If once in a while you forget this principle and start to praise your child by saying "good girl" or "good boy," you can stop yourself and change it to "good going" or "good job."

TECHNIQUES TO DEAL WITH BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS...

Remove the Child:
"Removing the Child" can be used to help teach toddlers the life lesson that "People do not want to be around you when you hurt them." If a child you are holding starts to hit, bite, pinch or otherwise hurt you, simply put him down while firmly stating your ground rule, such as, "People are not for hurting." If he is hurting another child while playing, you can remove him from the play area for a minute or so, again stating your ground rule. If he screams in protest, ignore it; don't reinforce the tantrum by giving him your attention. Just gently but firmly carry him away.

This technique can also work on young children who won't stay in their rooms at bedtime. Simply "remove the child" by leading her back to bed without saying a word, and repeat this each time she gets up and comes out of her room. Don't talk to her, and if you are angry or amused at the situation, don't let her see it. Talking, direct eye contact, or any other form of interaction, will only reward the child for getting out of bed and make her want to do it again. But, the very worst thing you can do is to start following this procedure, and then give up and let the child stay up; it will only make the problem harder to correct later.

So, take a deep breath and stick with the plan. It may take a while, but if you are firm, calm and very consistent, it will usually work.

Substitute:
When your young child is doing something you don't like, you can often distract him by getting him interested in another activity. Or sometimes you can simply substitute a more appropriate object for the one he is using. For example, if your child is coloring on one of your books, you can replace the book with some paper. In this way, you have not discouraged him from drawing, but have shown him the acceptable way of using crayons.

Remove the Object:
In the example above, if your child refuses to limit his coloring to the paper you have provided, you might choose to remove the crayons he is using until he is able to use them appropriately. In this case, it would be good to tell the child why you are removing the crayons and to do it as gently as you can. If possible, get him to release them to you rather than grabbing them out of his hands.
Teach Logical Consequences:
The "logical consequences" technique involves offering your child a choice between two positively-stated alternatives. One of the alternatives will be the ideal behavior you would prefer, and the other one will be the consequence that would seem to logically follow if the child does not choose the ideal behavior. "Logical" in this technique means that the consequence should be logically related to the offense.

Both of the choices you offer must be acceptable to you. If you ignore this and gamble that your child won’t pick a certain choice, you may be surprised! Have you ever said to your child, "I'm leaving. Are you staying here or coming with me?", only to have your child say "I'm staying"? Unless you've planned ahead for this response, it puts you in the position of being unable to follow through with the choice (consequence) you have offered, which doesn't do much for your credibility the next time around.

Here are some examples of logical consequences worded as choices:

(Note the CAPITALIZING for a few key phrases that help make this technique effective.)

- To a child playing noisily while the baby is asleep in the next room: "YOU MAY CHOOSE to play quietly here while the baby is sleeping, or play in your room until after her nap."

- To a child who is throwing food: "YOU HAVE A CHOICE; you may either stop throwing food or get down from the table." If she continues to throw food, you would help her get down since she, in effect, had made that choice. As you remove her from the table, say "I SEE YOU'VE CHOSEN to get down from the table."

- To a child being trained to play in the front yard under supervision: "We can play out here until Sarah's school bus comes if you can remember to stay out of the street." One foot in the street would then bring the immediate consequence of being taken inside, and the child should be told, "YOU MAY TRY THAT AGAIN LATER."

- To a child standing on a chair (when this is unacceptable) you could say, "You may sit on the chair or stand on the floor." If he continues to stand on the chair, simply lift him down and say, "I SEE YOU'VE DECIDED to stand."

Notice that the consequence in each of the above examples is logically related to the misbehavior. A general or unrelated consequence, such as not being allowed to watch TV for standing on the chair, would be less effective.

Be careful to maintain that magic balance of firmness and friendliness when using "logical consequences". Don't get angry; keep things very matter-of-fact. It's even okay to be sympathetic to your child's plight. In fact, the technique of "logical consequences" can actually be even more effective when you show some empathy, as long as you remain firm in following through with the consequence. Remember, you're simply helping your child experience the consequences of his own behavior.

Use Time Out:
Sometimes none of the methods described above seem to stop a child's misbehavior, especially if he is emotionally out of control. "Time out" can be used in these situations if the child is old enough to understand the concepts of "wait" and "quiet". If you maintain a calm, non-punitive attitude when enforcing "time out," your child will be less likely to rebel and more likely to learn to cooperate. Here are two different ways to use time out:

- **Child-Regulated Time Out:**
  Place a chair in a quiet area of the house. This will be used as a spot for anyone who is out of control to sit and calm down. Introduce the chair by telling your child, "This is where we go when we are upset so that we can calm down." You could even demonstrate by letting your child see you sitting in the chair for a few minutes when you are upset. When your child needs a time out, try to maintain a friendly but firm attitude as you lead her to the chair. Tell her: "You may come back when you feel calm."

- **Parent-Regulated Time Out:**
  If you prefer a more structured method for the time out chair, then when your child
misbehaves, tell him that his behavior is "not okay" and he needs to sit in time out. Set a kitchen timer (one minute per year of age) and tell him he may get up when the timer rings. Do not talk to your child while he is in time out. If he insists on acting up, reset the timer. Reset it again each time he acts up. When the timer rings, encourage him to return to the situation and use appropriate behavior. Be sure to praise him when he does.

**Ignore:**
Some behaviors are best handled by ignoring them. To be most effective, everyone in the household must cooperate on this one. When a child continually whines or throws tantrums, no one should respond to her. Don't talk to her, or even look at her while she's exhibiting these behaviors. Your goal is to help your child learn that whining and tantrums are not the way to get what she wants, and they will not help her get attention. (Of course, if she starts hitting or throwing things, a time out may be necessary.) After your child has calmed down, make a positive comment about her new behavior.

In calmer times, teach your child appropriate ways to get your attention or to get what she wants. Help her put her feelings into words so that she will begin to learn to do this for herself. Also, look for possible causes of misbehavior, such as being overtired or over stimulated, in order to try to prevent tantrums and whining episodes in the future.

The most important thing to remember about discipline is that it is a form of teaching, and good teaching is based not on punishment, but on guidance. When you use the positive discipline techniques outlined above, you will be guiding your child toward developing the kind of behavior that others will enjoy, which leads to a happier child and a more peaceful family.

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