

Discipline: A Parent's Guide for Infants and Toddlers

Sandra J. Bailey, Ph.D., CSandra J. Bailey, Ph.D., CFLE, Family and Human Development Specialist Family and Human Development Specialist

Using positive discipline, parents provide the solid foundation children need to learn how to monitor their own behavior as they get older. Strategies covered in this guide include responding to needs, baby-proofing the house, redirecting attention and monitoring schedules.

PARENTHOOD—A NEW PHASE

of life begins with the arrival of a baby. Schedules, interests and spouse or partner interactions all change with the addition of a new family member. Excitement and anticipation, expectations and dreams also accompany this special time. After the initial joy and celebration, the family settles into a new routine with the baby and becomes more focused on the day-to-day needs and the “D” word—discipline.

Parents often have questions about discipline. Although discipline means to teach or guide, the term is unfortunately often associated with punishment. The goal of discipline is to teach children how to act appropriately with family and friends, in school and in the community. Adults have the responsibility to guide children so that they become competent, caring and contributing members of society.

Responding to needs

Contrary to popular belief, infants cannot be spoiled by picking them up too often. *During the first year of life, babies are learning to bond with and trust their parents.* When an infant cries he/she is trying to tell parents that something is wrong. The infant may be tired, hungry or thirsty; she may need a diaper change or simply want a hug.

When parents respond to the child's needs, the infant learns that she can trust them to take care of her. Rather

than spoiling the infant, both the parent and baby learn a routine that meets the whole family's needs. Establishing structure helps the child learn what to expect, such as when to go to bed. This is an important lesson which will carry over as she gets older.

Baby-proofing the house

When babies become mobile, life changes again. A curious crawling baby can quickly get into situations that are not safe. Knobs and buttons on stereos and televisions become enticing, as does the dish of cat food and grandmother's antique vase on the coffee table.

Rather than continually being on guard and telling an infant “no,” parents can baby-proof the house and move such items out of reach. While some people will say, “I just taught my child not to touch things by slapping his hands and saying ‘no,’” parents must consider whether or not this strategy is effective.

Children are naturally curious. Providing them with items they can freely explore lets them learn about their environment in a safe manner. This strategy is a form of discipline.

Your child learns that you will provide a safe place for him by placing inappropriate items out of reach. Does this mean never saying “no” to a baby? Not at all. The strategy of baby-proofing the house is only one discipline technique. Children need to eventually learn what they may and may not touch.

Children are naturally curious. Providing them with items they can freely explore lets them learn about their environment in a safe manner.

Redirecting attention

Another strategy for disciplining a baby or toddler is redirection. Young children have short attention spans. If the baby is reaching for something that she shouldn't have, say “no” and then direct her towards a toy or something that she *can* play with. Sometimes a persistent child will need to be redirected several times from the same object, but be patient and continue to say “no” and redirect. Soon the baby will imitate the adult and shake her head “no” while looking at or reaching for the object.

Monitoring schedules

Monitoring an infant's or toddler's day is also an effective discipline strategy. Avoid taking the toddler to the grocery store when he or she is tired or hungry. This situation practically invites misbehavior. The child isn't trying to misbehave but he hasn't yet learned the self-control that older children and adults have mastered. Save those outings for times when the child is well rested, fed and feeling okay.

Young children tell time by routine not by the clock. Try to keep the child's schedule as consistent as possible. This will help to avoid misbehavior.

Positive Discipline Strategies

- **Respond to needs**

- **Baby-proof the house**

- **Redirect attention**

- **Monitor schedules**

The infant/toddler years can be physically exhausting for parents. Remember that the child is relying on you for love, guidance and care.

Parents who experience frustration with an infant or toddler are wise to use the old adage of “counting to ten” to gain self-control before picking up a child to discipline him or her.

Under no circumstances should you shake a child.

Parenting an infant or toddler is an exciting time of new discoveries as well as challenges. Using the strategies highlighted in this guide will help your child learn she can trust you and respect your authority. Positive discipline can provide the solid foundation children need to learn how to monitor their own behavior as they grow. With patience and consistency, which are essential for these strategies to be effective, your love and careful guidance are bound to achieve positive results.

For further reading

- Brazelton, T. B. & Sparrow, J. D. (2003). *Discipline the Brazelton Way*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Nelsen, J., Lott, L. & Glenn, S. (1999). *Positive Discipline A-Z, Revised and Expanded 2nd Edition: from Toddlers to Teens, 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems*. New York: Random House.
- Steinberg, L. (2004). *The 10 Basic Principles of Good Parenting*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Acknowledgements

- Cameron Clark, Madison County Extension Agent
- Diana DelCampo, Ph.D., Extension Specialist, New Mexico State University
- Verlin Koenig, Valley County Extension Agent
- Merrylee Vukonich, Carbon County Extension Agent
- Jane Wolery, Teton County Extension Agent



<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt200412.html>

Copyright © 2005 MSU Extension Service

We encourage the use of this document for nonprofit educational purposes. This document may be reprinted for nonprofit educational purposes if no endorsement of a commercial product, service or company is stated or implied, and if appropriate credit is given to the author and the MSU Extension Service. To use these documents in electronic formats, permission must be sought from the Extension Communications Coordinator, Communications and Public Affairs, 416 Culbertson Hall, Montana State University–Bozeman, Bozeman MT 59717; **E-mail: publications@montana.edu**. To order additional publications, please contact your county or reservation MSU Extension office, visit our online catalog at www.montana.edu/publications, or e-mail orderpubs@montana.edu



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Montana State University and the Montana State University Extension Service prohibit discrimination in all of their programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital and family status. Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Douglas L. Steele, Vice Provost and Director, Extension Service, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717.

File under: Human Development

E-15 (Parent Education)

**Reviewed Oct. 2005
2000 10.05GM**