

Discipline: A Parent's Guide for School-Age Children

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This article discusses how to guide your child's behavior by setting a good example, establishing routines, using natural and logical consequences, being firm and using reminders.



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WHEN CHILDREN REACH SCHOOL AGE THEY ARE becoming more independent. They spend the majority of their waking hours in school and extracurricular activities. Kids this age strive to do things “right.” They want approval from their friends and important adults in their lives.

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

School-age children are concrete thinkers. They do best solving problems when they have an example to help them understand. Youngsters at this stage have better muscle control and coordination than they did as preschoolers. You've probably noticed your child's attention span is longer, too. These developments point to the need to change some of the rules and discipline strategies you used when your child was younger.

Parents are wise to have several methods for dealing with behavior problems that might come up, as different situations often require a different tactic. Here are some common strategies that can help you guide your child's conduct.

Setting a good example

Your children are taking in everything you do and copying the behavior they see. One of the best discipline techniques is simply paying attention to the way you act and modeling what you want them to learn. When you are frustrated, do you seek solutions or yell and throw an “adult temper tantrum?” When you make a mistake, do you apologize? Do you work to correct your mistakes? The old saying is true that “actions speak louder than words.”

Reminders, reminders

Sometimes it's easy to think that school-age children should be old enough to know the rules and not need reminders. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Part of the reason is that

they need to understand what rules are the most important to you. In addition, a child going a mile a minute or with his mind on other things, often isn't thinking about rules. Finally, as all of us have tried at one time or another, kids want to see if they can “bend” the rules. Yes, sometimes you will feel like a “broken record,” telling them something repeatedly. But next time you have to remind your 10-year-old to hang up her coat, remember that she is still learning the rules and trying to find out which ones are most important to you.

Establishing routines

Routines were important in the toddler and preschool years and are still important now. They help school age children learn to manage their time and know what to expect. A typical plan can include times for getting up and going to bed, doing homework and household tasks. Routines let children know what to expect when sharing family meals or other activities. By having some set structure, school age children learn how to act within a family. If your family does not have routines, start small by setting one or two – such as serving dinner at 6:30 each evening.

Natural and logical consequences

Children learn best how to act when they understand why some behavior is just not okay. You can help children learn this by using natural and logical consequences. A natural consequence is one that occurs simply because of the action. For example, if your daughter announces to her friends that “they are all stupid,” she will discover no one wants to play with her. The boy who takes a bad spill while trying a trick on his bicycle will learn that doing some stunts can be dangerous and he can get hurt. And the girl who won't wear a coat in the winter will quickly realize that she will get cold. Of course, parents need to monitor natural consequences so that children won't find themselves in any serious trouble.

Logical consequences are at work, for instance, when your son receives a lower grade in math because he didn't do his homework, or you ask your daughter to use her

allowance money to replace a favorite vase she carelessly broke. Youngsters who don't clean their rooms may find themselves responsible for additional household chores. By linking the consequence to the unwanted behavior, children see why they shouldn't do that again.

Standing your ground

Children need consistency in their lives and that applies to discipline, too. If they break a family rule, there are consequences and parents need to enforce those consequences every time. For example, if your child misuses computer privileges and you decide the consequence is "no computer for three days," then don't simply ignore the misuse if it happens a second time. This sends the message that the rule isn't really important. If your 12-year-old is "grounded" for a week, don't change the restriction to four days simply because your child is pushing to go out.

Does standing your ground and staying consistent mean being inflexible? No, parents need to realize when to give and take. A specific circumstance or a child's level of maturity may call for changes in the way you handle the situation. The key is to be consistent in discipline, follow through with consequences and make changes as appropriate.

Strategies to avoid

It's natural to become frustrated with children when they misbehave. However, adults should never spank, slap or hit a child. Physical punishment sends the message that violence is acceptable and that larger people are more powerful. Children also can be embarrassed or feel that they are not worth much when they are spanked or hit.

Frequently parents and other caregivers will "ground" or restrict activities for school age children's misbehaviors. If the restriction is for not coming home on time, then the consequence is logical. Some adults, however, overuse this type of discipline to the point it's not effective any more.

Also, it's easy to over react when you are in the heat of the moment. Grounding your daughter for "life" is totally impractical. Remember to set appropriate and realistic limits.

Conclusion

Parenting school-age children is very different from parenting infants, toddlers and preschoolers. You are in the position now to start letting your children make more choices on their own. Kids this age need to know that they are capable. You can guide your children's behavior by setting a good example, establishing routines, using natural and logical consequences, reminding them of important rules and being firm and consistent. Perhaps the most important method you can practice is modeling good behavior yourself.

All youngsters will make mistakes and misbehave from time to time. Parents have the responsibility to teach their kids how to correct and learn from mistakes. After all, we want our children to eventually be able to act appropriately even when we aren't around.

For further reading

- Steinberg, L. (2004). *The Ten Basic Principles of Good Parenting*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Nelsen, J., Lott, L. & Glenn, S. (1999). *Positive Discipline A-Z: 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems*. New York: Random House.

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