



# MIDDLEBORO PEDIATRICS

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## DISCIPLINE: RULES AND CONSEQUENCES

### The Problem

Children need to be protected from harm and taught to live cooperatively with other people. They need external controls after 6 months of age, or by the time they learn to crawl. They don't start to develop internal controls (self-control) until 3 or 4 years of age. They continue to need external controls, in gradually decreasing amounts, through adolescence. Children raised without reasonable limit-setting can become "spoiled".

The first goal of discipline is to protect your child from danger. Other important goals are to teach your child to distinguish right from wrong and to respect the rights of others. To teach respect for the rights of others, first teach your child to respect your rights.

### The Solution

#### Setting Rules

Begin discipline after the child is 6 months of age. Young infants don't need discipline. By the time they crawl, however, children need rules to protect their safety.

Express each correction of misbehavior as a clear, concrete rule. Examples: "Don't push your brother" and "Don't interrupt while I'm on the telephone."

Also state the acceptable or appropriate behavior. Your child needs to know what is expected. Examples: "Play with your brother peacefully," "Look at books or play with your toys while I'm on the phone," or "Walk, don't run."

Ignore unimportant or irrelevant misbehavior. Avoid constant criticism. Behavior such as swinging the legs while sitting, poor table manners, or normal negativism-saying NO to everything-is unimportant during the early years.

Set rules that are fair and attainable. Don't punish your child for behavior that is part of normal development, such as thumb sucking, fear of being separated from parents, and toilet training accidents.

Avoid trying to change "no-win" situations through punishment. Some behaviors become the focus of power struggles between parent and child. Examples include wetting pants, pulling hair (the child's own), thumb sucking, body rocking, masturbation, and not eating enough. The first step in resolving such "no-win" power struggles is to withdraw from the conflict and stop punishing your child for the behavior. Then give your child positive feedback when he behaves as you'd like.

At first, concentrate on two or three rules. Give top priority to safety issues, such as not running into the street, and behavior that can harm others, such as biting and hitting. Of next importance is behavior that damages property. Then come all the annoying behaviors that wear you down-whining, throwing tantrums, or interrupting.

Apply rules consistently. Once rules are agreed on, it may help to write them down and post them.

### **Discipline techniques**

Structure the home environment. You can change your child's surroundings to eliminate or restrict access to objects or situations that could cause problems. You can take care to place dangerous or fragile objects out of reach, pad sharp furniture corners, or plug electrical outlets. You can also block stairways and other off-limits area with gates, lock up medicines and cleaning supplies, and fence in the yard.

Distract your child from misbehavior. Distracting a young child from temptation by attracting her attention to something else, such as toys, food, or games, is especially helpful when the child is in someone else's house or a store.

Ignore harmless misbehavior. Ignoring helps stop unacceptable behavior that is harmless-such as throwing tantrums, sulking, whining, quarreling, or interrupting.

Express verbal and nonverbal disapproval. Mild disapproval is often all that is required to stop misbehavior by young children. Get close to your child, establish eye contact, look stern, and simply say, "No" or "Stop".

Physically move or escort your child ("manual guidance"). Manual guidance means that you move a child from one place to another-bed, bath, or time-out chair-when he refuses to move on his own. Help him as much as needed. You can even carry him, if need be.

Use temporary time-out or social isolation. Time-out is the most effective discipline technique available to parents of young children. It is used to interrupt unacceptable behavior by removing the child from the scene to a boring place, such as a playpen, chair, or the corner of a room. Time-out should last about one minute for each year of age but not more than five minutes. See additional information on time-out.

Restrict places where a child may do unwanted behaviors. This technique is especially helpful for behaviors that can't be eliminated. Allowing nose picking and masturbation in your child's room, for example, prevents an unnecessary power struggle.

Use natural consequences. Your child can learn appropriate behavior from the natural laws of the physical world. Not dressing properly for the weather means your child will get cold or wet, for example. Breaking a toy means it isn't fun to play with anymore.

Use logical consequences. The purpose of this technique is to make your child accountable for her problems and decisions by applying consequences that are logically related to the misbehavior. Many logical consequences simply involve removing a possession or privilege temporarily if your child has misused that possession or privilege (taking away her crayons if she draws on the wall, for instance). Other examples might include having your child clean up her own messes or not replacing a lost or broken toy.

Delay a privilege until your child has performed a task or desired behavior. Examples of the work-before play principle are: "After you clean your room, you may go out and play" or "When you finish your homework, you may watch TV."

Use "I" messages. When your child misbehaves, tell him how you feel. Say, "I am upset when you do that." Your child is more likely to listen to this message than one that starts with "you". "You" messages usually trigger a defensive reaction.

Use negotiation and family conferences. As children become older, they need more communication with their parents about behavior problems. A parent can begin such a discussion by saying, "We need to change such and such. What are some ways we could handle this? What do you think would be fair?"

Use discipline techniques appropriate to your child's age. The techniques described previously are most effective when used at appropriate ages as follows:

- **Birth to 6 months.** No discipline necessary.
- **6 months to 3 years.** Structuring the home environment, distracting, ignoring, verbal and nonverbal disapproval, physically moving or escorting the child from the scene, and temporary time-out.
- **3 to 5 years.** Preceding techniques (especially temporary time-out) plus natural consequences, restricting places where the child can misbehave, and logical consequences.
- **5 years to adolescence.** Preceding techniques plus delay of privileges, "I" message, and negotiation in family conferences. Structuring the environment and distracting can be discontinued.
- **Adolescence.** Use logical consequences, "I" messages, and family conferences about house rules. Time-out and manual guidance can be discontinued at this point.

Discontinue physical punishment. Physical punishment teaches children that it's OK to be aggressive-to hit or hurt another person, for example-to solve problems. Most out-of-control children, the ones most likely to be physically punished, are already too aggressive.

Discontinue yelling. Yelling and screaming teach your child to yell back. This makes it seem that shouting matches are acceptable. In the long run, your child will respond better to a polite tone of voice and diplomatic words.

Don't forget to reward acceptable (desired) behaviors. Don't take good behavior for granted. Watch for behavior you like, then praise your child. At these times, move close to your child, look at her, smile, and express affection. A parent's attention is the favorite reward of most children.

### **Applying consequences (punishments):**

Don't be ambivalent. Mean what you say, and follow through.

Correct with love. Talk to your child the way you want people to talk to you. Avoid yelling or using a disrespectful tone of voice. Correct your child in a kind way. Sometimes begin your correction with, "I'm sorry I can't let you . . ."

Direct the punishment against the misbehavior, not the child. Avoid degrading comments such as, "You never do anything right."

Apply consequences immediately. Punishment should occur very soon after the misbehavior and be administered by the adult who witnessed the misdeed. Delayed punishments are less effective because your children forget why they are being punished.

Make a one-sentence comment about the rule when you punish your child. At the same time, restate the preferred behavior, but avoid making a long speech. Example: "We don't hurt the dog. We pet the dog."

Ignore your child's arguments while you are correcting him. This is the child's way of delaying punishment.

Follow consequences with love and trust. Welcome your child back into the family circle, and do not comment upon the previous misbehavior or require an apology for it.

**Call our office during regular hours if:**

1. Your child's misbehavior is dangerous to himself or others.
2. The instances of misbehavior seem too numerous to count.
3. Your child is also having behavior problems at school.
4. You can't see many good points in your child.
5. Your child seems depressed.
6. You and your spouse can't agree on discipline.
7. You can't give up physical punishment. Call immediately if you are afraid you might hurt your child.
8. The misbehavior does not improve after one month of using this approach.

**TIME - OUT**

Time-out is one of the most effective discipline techniques available for parents of young children. It is used to interrupt unacceptable behavior by removing the child from the scene of misbehavior and placing them in a boring place for a designated period of time. Time-out can be initiated once the child reaches eighteen months of age and can continue until the child becomes an adolescent.

The choice of the time-out location is very important. It should be a place where there are no distractions for the child. A designated chair or corner would be ideal. A playpen can also be chosen. It is preferable not to choose a child's bedroom, crib or bed as the punishment area. These areas should be considered safe places for your child. A time-out area should have no toys present. The child should not be able to see the TV or be able to listen to the radio. No one should talk to the child while they are in time-out.

The child should be told in advance which are the specific behaviors that could land him or her in the time-out area. First and foremost would be behaviors that can cause danger to the child itself (running into the street or putting a fork into an electrical socket) or causing harm to others, (kicking, biting, hitting, etc.) Behaviors that cause damage to property should also be disciplined.

Now that your child knows which behaviors are unacceptable, the child will learn the consequences of misbehavior. If your child misbehaves, give a single warning that further misbehavior will lead to time-out. If the misbehavior occurs again he or she is placed in the designated time-out area and is required to stay there for a predetermined amount of time. The amount of time should be equal to one minute for every year of age with a maximum of five minutes. As you are placing your child in time-out you should remind the child why they are being punished, for example "You are going to sit in the corner

now because you bit Johnny and you need some time to calm down". After the designated time period has passed you may tell your child to get up. An egg timer set to the appropriate amount of time needed can be used to keep track of the time. After the bell rings, your child may get up. Your child should be reminded again after time-out is over why punishment was given. After that there need not be any further discussion of the misbehavior.

When you first begin using the time-out technique, your child will initially resist. Since the time-out location is usually not an enclosed area, the child may simply walk away from the time-out area before the time up. It is very important that your child be taken by the hand and brought back to the time-out area and told in a firm voice that because he/she left the time-out before time had ended time-out is starting from the beginning. If you are using an egg timer, you can show the child that you are resetting the timer back to the original time. You may need to do this several times until your child gets the message to remain in the time-out area for the designated period of time. Your child will quickly learn that to get the punishment over with, and it is in their best interest to simply remain in the time-out area until time is up. Most children learn this relatively soon.

Once placed in time-out your child may begin to cry. This is a natural effect of the time-out and simply shows they do not like the punishment. However, children may sometimes continue with other misbehavior while in time-out. This may include screaming and yelling, hitting, kicking the wall or using foul language. If any of those behaviors occur while in the time-out area, the child should be told that if these behaviors occur while in the time-out area, their time will not even begin until those behaviors have stopped. Eventually your child will learn to sit quietly in time-out and wait for the time to end.

After initiating time-out you may find you are frequently placing your child in the corner. It may seem that your child lives in the corner. This is natural initially, but you will find over a time the visits to the time-out area become less and less often. If a few weeks go by and the trips to time-out are still frequent, please call our office so we can discuss the situation. After a while you will find that if you observe your child about to commit a misbehavior a simple reminder of time-out may stop a child in their tracks and prevent the misbehavior. That is the goal of time-out; preventing further misbehavior.