



# For Parents of young children

## Handling Misbehavior

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

How do you get your child to do what you think is best for him? You may think that though theories are alright, you have to let your children know you mean business. And yet you need theories for disciplining children. You need to look ahead and determine what you're trying to accomplish.

Discipline involves teaching children that there are certain rules people live by and that they are expected to eventually adopt these rules themselves. The goal of discipline is the growth of self-discipline in children. As a child's judgment grows and develops, so do his responsibility and self-discipline. As a parent, you play an important part in helping your child develop judgment and responsibility.

Now comes the task of applying the theory—getting Jimmy and Mary to practice self-discipline and to behave as you think they should. In the long run, you want your child to learn from any experience. And whatever you do, you hope that you're acting in the best interests of your child and that you're giving him the best kind of help. One way to give him the best kind of help is to think before you act. Stop and ask yourself *why* your child did something rather than only thinking about what you should do about it.

Susan interrupts repeatedly as her mother is reading her a story. Is Susan disrespectful and unappreciative? Or is she tired from sitting too long? Are there too many distractions in the room? Or is the story beyond her level of comprehension? Her reason for interrupting should determine what you do about it. Try to sharpen your judgment about your child's behavior—study your children just as you would other fascinating subjects.

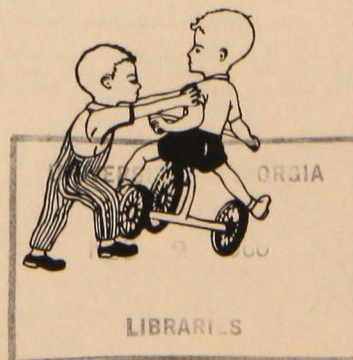
There are three ways to handle misbehavior:

- ◇ By explaining.
- ◇ By approving.
- ◇ By correcting.

### Explain Clearly

Before you can expect your child to do as he is told, you must be sure he understands right and wrong. You can't just assume that he knows, for learning the difference between right and wrong is a slow process. Frequently, little children forget what you tell them or don't pay attention when you do tell them something. And sometimes they want something so badly that you must correct them over and over.

Occasionally you have to show your child what you mean. Two-year-old Amy is about to rush out in the rain. Telling her not to go outdoors probably won't be enough. Showing her how the rain feels on her hand and showing her where she can walk outdoors may be the solution. Children have to be told, sometimes shown how, and then told over again. Until your child is at least 3 years old, giving him long explanations of why you want him to do this or that is practically useless. Brief explanations of right or wrong are best.



### Approve a Right Choice

Don't forget that approval is an important tool in discipline. You can approve your child's actions with a nod or a smile, by using such expressions as "That's nice" or "That's fine," or by giving him an occasional gift or surprise.

Preschool children are not just naturally naughty. If their basic needs are met they cooperate willingly. They often strike out at us, but usually they do so in an attempt to satisfy a basic need. However, if his basic needs go unmet for too long a time, a child may become "mean".

A word of caution in the use of approval — don't overdo it. Bestow praise casually, simply, and sincerely.

### Correct When Necessary

There are many ways you can correct a child. Parents often use these disciplinary tools: isolating, depriving, spanking, withdrawing love, ignoring, scolding, frightening, shaming, and making amends. Let's look at them individually.

### Isolating

Sammy is playing in the yard with two other children. Suddenly he begins to throw rocks in all directions. Removing Sammy to the back steps has several advantages. First, it will stop him from throwing rocks. It will show Sammy that playing with others requires a certain kind of behavior, and it will give him a chance to calm down and be his own self again. Taking him aside also will prevent you from dealing with the situation while you're still wrought up.

Restraining your child in this fashion is a mild form of isolation. If you have difficulty getting your child to sit as punishment, you may have to stay close

and see it through. You needn't restrain a little child for a long time or use forms of isolation that frighten him.

Of course, if your child prefers to be by himself anyway, isolating him will not be very effective. To be effective, punishment has to be adapted to the individual child, to his age, to his personality, to his ability to understand, and to what he has done.

### Depriving

Linda has a soft cuddly bear she takes to bed with her every night. In a flareup, she hits her little brother with it. Her mother may decide to deprive Linda of the toy for awhile. If Linda is very young, she probably will not see the connection and being deprived of her bear will be confusing and disturbing. Depriving a child of a favorite toy or special event can be a meaningful form of punishment only if he can see a logical relationship between the forbidden behavior and the penalty he pays.

### Spanking

Everyone has his opinion about the value of spanking. The child who has never been spanked is a rarity. On the other hand, some parents spank their children too much or spank too severely. Why do parents spank their children? Some of the reasons are:

- ◇ They spank because it seems to be a quick way of getting results.
- ◇ They spank when other means fail.
- ◇ They spank to release their own annoyance.
- ◇ They spank to satisfy the opinions of a neighbor, grandparent, or someone else.

Some authorities think the only excuse for using physical punishment is to protect your child in an emergency situation. For example, a young father spansks his 4-year-old daughter for riding her tricycle in the street. He had told her before that he would spank her if she did. The situation was an unhappy one for a moment, but the child probably learned something from it.



Often, spanking is not a wise remedy, even in an emergency. If a child is too young to understand reasons for real spanking, rapping his fingers or gently slapping his wrists will convey forcefully that "no" means "no." Frowning at them or simply restraining their fingers is sufficient punishment for some children.

Don't be afraid to correct your children when it's necessary, but remember that frequent or severe physical punishment is unwise. Children who are punished severely may become apathetic towards the world or they may become aggressive and want to damage property and hurt people. One study has shown that although there are many causes of delinquency, delinquent children have been spanked more often than nondelinquents.

### Ignoring or Shaming

Some people think that slapping or spanking a child is preferable to being cross or ignoring him. If you are cross or ignore him, your child may feel he is losing your love, something he values highly.

An understanding parent is aware of his child's need for assurance of love and gives this assurance even when he must reject what his child is doing. A child can sense his parents' affection. Frightening or shaming him may get results for the moment, but you may have to deal with difficult social-emotional problems in the future because of it.

### Making Amends

Some parents think that children should make amends for any damage they do. But, if Jerry breaks Judy's airplane, should he have to offer Judy one

of his own toys? How Jerry feels about his toy and about the whole situation should have a bearing on your actions. Most children would not be able to give up one of their toys easily.

If Jerry hurts Judy, should he be made to apologize? You must consider Jerry's age and development. Forcing him to say he's sorry before he has reached the age when he can feel sympathy is wasting time.

### Telling and Approving

Of the three methods of handling behavior problems, you should stress the first two — telling and approving — in early childhood. Don't place great emphasis on punishment until you're sure your child is capable of intentionally misbehaving. Then give great care to selecting the right punishment to fit your child and the situation. Don't always use the same form of punishment — remember that you want your child to learn from many different situations.

When you must punish your child, try to remain calm and unruffled no matter how exasperated you may be. It's enough for your child to have to deal with his own upset feelings; he will need your comfort and support.

### References

Ilg, Frances L., and Louise Bates Ames. *Child Behavior*. Chapter 17, "What To Do About Discipline." Dell Books. (60¢).

For a copy of the publications listed below, write to:

Child Study Association of America  
9 East 89th Street  
New York, New York 10028

The brochures are 50¢ each.

- ◇ Katherine M. Wolf. *The Controversial Problem of Discipline*.
- ◇ Aline B. Auerback. *The Why and How of Discipline*.
- ◇ Edith L. Atkin. *Aggressiveness in Children*.

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