

## Children's Services

# Managing Children's Behaviour

"My kids just don't listen to me!" "It's a battle to get my kids to do anything!" "When I was a kid we got a good belting if we stepped out of line! Kids today have no discipline."

**As a parent who wants the best for your children, you strive to give them a good start in life. It's not always easy, making sure they develop the skills they will need to manage their own behaviour and grow into happy and successful adults.**

There are two main causes of misbehaviour in young children:

- they haven't yet learned what is expected of them – eg a toddler might pull flowers from the garden because they've seen you weeding
- they express their feelings or 'act out' – or they might be angry and frustrated because you're busy and they want your attention.

Very young children are still learning language and trying to understand how the world works. They are not yet able to tell you what they are feeling and children under five can experience a range of emotions in a very short space of time. They react instinctively rather than logically.

You are your child's first and most important teacher – what they see you do, they will imitate. If you tell your children not to swear, then they hear you swear, you're sending a mixed message that confuses their understanding.



## What is discipline?

Children need discipline, limits and guidance. These help them feel safe and secure while learning to get along with others and what is acceptable behaviour.

Effective discipline teaches children how to act and behave positively rather than just forces them to do what you want. People often confuse discipline with physical punishment (smacking).

The type of discipline you decide to use should fit with your child's age, abilities and needs, and be based on:

- planning and explaining
- teaching
- listening (communicating)
- modelling
- distracting
- giving choices
- making rules
- giving consequences and following through when the rules are broken.

### Planning and explaining

Planning ahead means taking into consideration your needs and the needs of your children, and anticipating what is likely to happen – eg if you have to go shopping, try to plan it so that it's not at a time when your child is usually tired and therefore more likely to misbehave. Explain to your child where you're going and what you expect of them – eg 'I need you to stay with me and don't run around the shop. We have to be quick so we're home to meet your sister off the bus.'

### Teaching

It's important that we teach children positive behaviours – respecting others, caring for property, possessions, animals or the environment, and caring for themselves. We need to teach them the ways to do this – eg we show them how to care for a pet and how to play with it (not too rough or hurting it in any way).

### Listening

Just as we expect children to listen to what we are telling them, we should listen to what they are telling us. Be aware of their individual signs of discomfort, distress and pain, but don't just assume you know what they're feeling – sometimes, when we try to help we tend to take over and give advice, when all they want is for us to listen to them.

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Brought to you by YWCA NSW supporting people at critical times. Authored by Liz Connors, Early Childhood Specialist, YWCA NSW

#### Head Office

5-11 Wentworth Ave  
Sydney NSW 2000  
t 02 9285 6211  
f 02 9283 2485  
e [info@ywcansw.com.au](mailto:info@ywcansw.com.au)  
[www.ywcansw.com.au](http://www.ywcansw.com.au)

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### Modelling

Children watch our every move, so make sure they're not just learning 'Do as I say, not do as I do!'. If they see you caring for others, they learn to treat others well. If they witness criticism and fighting, then they learn that negative interaction. If you smoke or use drugs – regardless of what you tell them about the dangers – they will likely follow your example.

### Distracting

Distraction is a simple form of behaviour management. When you see your child is 'just holding it together', use this technique as circuit breaker – 'Wow! Look at this!' 'Who wants to go to the park?' 'Let's read a book together.' Simple distractions can mean the difference between children losing control or learning to divert their anger into a more positive activity. This technique is very useful for young children, but older children can benefit too – eg 'I see you're getting frustrated with your homework. Why not ride your bike or watch some television for half an hour and then come back to it?'

### Giving choices

As the goal of raising children is to teach them independence, just telling what to do won't help! From a young age they want to try different tasks themselves and feel some control over what they're doing, so if possible, provide them with choices (choices you can actually live with or provide). A child who is throwing toys around the room can be given the choice of playing with their toys properly 'or you can pack them away and come and read a book with me.' However don't give choices – such as 'Do you want to come with me?' – when there is only one practical option anyway, or asking 'Do you want a smack?' when a child is misbehaving isn't giving a choice – it's encouraging a confrontation.

### Making rules

Try to have rules in place before problems arise and for older children, try to include them in setting these rules – they are more likely to follow them that way. Too many rules and children will never remember them all, so keep it clear and simple (eg 'We treat others with respect and kindness'). Explain why certain behaviours are not OK – if you just say 'No!', children don't learn why, which makes it harder for them to work out good behaviour on their own. Discuss the rules when you and your child aren't busy, but be prepared for a difference of opinion. Make rules age appropriate, avoid sending the mixed message of laughing while you're telling them 'no', and – most importantly – be prepared to back up what you say with an appropriate consequence. Rules will only mean something to a child if they know you mean what you say.

### Consequences

Children need to learn that their actions have consequences, as this teaches them about responsibility. Consequences are most effective if they happen soon after the misbehaviour has occurred, so children can relate them to their actions. Keep them short and to the point so they're remembered – eg if your child makes a mess, your child help clean it up. There will also be naturally occurring consequences – eg when your child leaves toys lying around, they can get damaged or lost. Avoid replacing your children's toys in such a situation, or they learn that you will always 'fix' their problems, even if they cause them. Consequences should always be safe for your child and be based on their age and developmental ability – eg making a three year old clean the house is both unsafe and unreasonable.



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### Discipline at different ages

#### Babies (0 – 12 months)

Babies don't need discipline – they are not able to think ahead, reason, or remember the 'lesson'. They don't do things to 'get at' you – when they cry and stay awake in the early hours, they are trying to tell you something – like they're teething and their mouth is sore, or they're hungry/thirsty, or they're lonely and need a cuddle.

#### Toddlers (12 – 36 months)

Infants and toddlers are energetic and very curious. Their main way of learning is through their senses (touch, smell, sight, taste and hearing), so they love to explore with their hands. Making a mess, tipping things out of boxes and pulling saucepans out of cupboards are all part of the learning process – they often get frustrated because they want to do more than they can.

It's important to show them new skills with patience and praise, and be positive – eg 'Hold the cup in two hands' rather than 'Don't spill your drink'.

Child-proof their environment. Placing objects you don't want them to touch out of reach. Be aware of situations likely to cause them stress and try to prepare them in advance. Smacking and yelling often makes them fearful or angry – and can actually keep the behaviour going. It also teaches that aggression is the way to solve problems. When they are demanding, clingy and whining, avoid pushing them away – it can make your toddler feel more insecure. They are more likely to play longer when they feel safe and secure.

#### Preschoolers (3 – 5 year olds)

Preschoolers understand more of what you tell them and what is expected of them. Developmentally they are beginning to share, take turns and play with others. They are easily excited and like to be in control so it's quite normal for them to 'show off' and act 'silly', although there should be less tantrums and nagging to get what they want. Because they understand more, it's important to explain why you are doing something – even to apologise if you later realise you've been wrong. Get them involved in activities that burn off their excess energy, such as setting up a challenging (but safe) outdoor obstacle course. There are lots of different and inexpensive things around the house you can use – have fun coming up with variations – or take them to a local park that has plenty of play equipment. Be sure to acknowledge, "Thank you for picking up your toys, now they won't get lost or broken" – remember consequences can also be positive.

#### Primary school (5 – 12 year olds)

At this age children are learning to see things from another person's point of view and how their actions (eg cheating and stealing) directly affect others. They are learning the difference between truth and fantasy and might start to lie – especially if they know your reaction will be harsh. They might become sticklers for the rules and are often labelled 'tattle tales', but as they get older they start to do things because it is the right thing to do, rather than because someone has made them do it. When talking with your child be open-minded and let them express their ideas and opinions, especially in making decisions about rules and consequences – this helps them learn self-discipline. Give incentives for good behaviour and teach them conflict resolution skills – remembering they watch and learn from what you do more than what you say.

Last of all, you are not superhuman – and no one expects you to be. A sense of humour will help you keep your sanity and can sometimes defuse a tense situation. Try to look after your health too, as the more tired and run-down you feel, the more likely you are to be impatient and short-tempered with your child's behaviour.

For further information on children's behaviour, see the fact sheet on 'Discipline (0-12 years)' at [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)



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