

What Parents Can Do to Change Their Child's Behavior

What is normal behavior for a child?

Normal behavior in children depends on the child's age, personality, and physical and emotional development. A child's behavior may be a problem if it doesn't match the expectations of the family or if it is disruptive. Knowing what to expect from your child at each age will help you decide what is normal behavior.

What can I do to change my child's behavior?

Children tend to continue a behavior when it is rewarded and stop a behavior when it is ignored. Consistency in your reaction to a behavior is important because rewarding and punishing the same behavior at different times confuses your child. When your child's behavior is a problem, you have three choices:

- Decide the behavior is not a problem because it's appropriate to the child's age and stage of development.
- Attempt to stop the behavior, either by ignoring it or by punishing it.
- Introduce a new behavior that you prefer.

How do I stop misbehavior?

The best way to stop unwanted behavior is to ignore it. This way works best when you're able to wait for results. When you want the behavior to stop immediately, you can use the time-out method (see page 2). Physical punishment is less effective.

Why shouldn't I use physical punishment?

Many parents use physical punishment to stop undesirable behavior. The biggest drawback to this method is that although the punishment stops the bad behavior for a while, it doesn't give the child an alternative. If the child doesn't know a good behavior, he or she is likely to return to the bad behavior. Physical punishment becomes less effective with time and can cause the child to behave aggressively. It can also be carried too far—into child abuse. Other methods of punishment are preferred and should be used whenever possible.

How do I use the time-out method?

Decide ahead of time the behaviors that will result in a time out—usually tantrums, or aggressive or dangerous behavior. Choose a time-out place that is uninteresting for the child and not frightening—usually a chair, a corner or a playpen. When you're away from home, consider using a car or a restroom as a time-out place. When the behavior occurs, tell the child the behavior is unacceptable and give one warning that you will put the child in time out if the behavior doesn't stop. Remain calm and don't look angry. If the child goes on misbehaving, take him or her to the time-out area. Set a timer so the child will know when time out is over. Time out should be brief—one minute for each year of age—and should begin immediately after reaching the time-out place or after the child calms down. You should stay within sight or earshot of the child but don't talk to him or her. If the child leaves the time-out area, gently replace him or her and consider resetting the timer. When the time out is over, let the child leave the time-out place. Don't discuss the bad behavior but look for ways to praise good behavior later on.

How do I encourage a new, desired behavior?

One way to encourage good behavior is to use a reward system. This way works best in children over two years of age. It can take up to two months to work. Keeping a diary of behavior can be helpful to parents, to show gradual changes in their child.

Choose one to two behaviors you would like to change (such as bedtime behavior, toothbrushing or picking up toys). Choose a reward your child would enjoy. Examples of good rewards are an extra bedtime story, delaying bedtime by a half-hour, a preferred snack or, for older children, earning points toward a special toy, a privilege or a small amount of money. Explain the desired behavior and the reward to the child. For example, "If you get into your pajamas and brush your teeth before this TV show is over, you can stay up a half hour later." Request the behavior only one time. If the child does what you ask, give the reward. You can help the child if necessary but don't get too involved. Because any attention from parents, even negative attention, is so rewarding to children, they may prefer to have parental attention instead of a reward at first. Transition statements, such as "In five minutes, play time will be over," are helpful when you are teaching your child new behaviors.

This system helps you avoid power struggles with your child. However, you must live with your child's choice. If your child chooses not to behave as you ask, the child is not punished; he or she simply does not get the reward.

What are some examples of this method?

Beat the Clock (best method for a dawdling child)

- Ask the child to do a task. Set a timer. If the task is done before the timer rings, the child gets a reward. To decide the amount of time to give the child, figure out the child's "best time" to do that task and add five minutes.

The Good Behavior Game (good when you're trying to teach a new behavior)

- Write a short list of good behaviors on a chart and mark the chart with a star each time you see the good behavior. After the child has earned a small number of stars (depending on the child's age), give him or her a reward.

Good Marks/Bad Marks (best method for difficult, highly active children)

- In a short time (about an hour) put a mark on a chart or on the child's hand each time you see him or her performing a good behavior. For example, if you see your child playing quietly, solving a problem without fighting, picking up toys or reading a book, you would mark the chart.
- After a certain number of marks, give the child a reward.
- You can also make negative marks each time a bad behavior occurs. If you do this, you only give the child a reward if there are more positive marks than negative marks.

Developing Quiet Time (often useful when you're making supper)

- Ask the child to play quietly alone or with a sibling for a short time (maybe 30 minutes).
- Check on the child frequently (every two to five minutes, depending on the child's age) and give a reward or a token for each few minutes the child was quiet or playing well.
- Gradually increase the intervals (go from checking the child's behavior every two to five minutes to checking every 30 minutes), but continue to give rewards for each time period the child was quiet or played well.

What else can I do to help my child behave well?

Make a short list of important rules. Avoid power struggles and no-win situations. Try not to go to extremes. When you think you've overreacted, it's better to use your common sense to solve the problem, even if you have to be inconsistent just this once.

Accept your child's basic personality, whether it's shy, social, talkative or active. Basic personality can be changed a little, but not very much. Try to avoid situations that can make your child cranky, such as becoming overly stimulated, tired or bored. Don't criticize your child in front of other people. Describe the child's behavior as bad, but don't label the child as bad. Praise your child often when he or she deserves it. Touch your child affectionately and often.

Develop little routines and rituals, especially at bed times and meal times. Provide transition remarks (such as, "In five minutes, we'll be eating dinner."). Allow your child choices whenever possible. You can ask, "Do you want to wear your red pajamas or your blue pajamas to bed tonight?"

As children get older, they enjoy becoming involved in household rule making. Don't debate the rules at the time of misbehavior but invite the child to participate in rule making at another time.

Children who learn that bad behavior is not tolerated and that good behavior is rewarded are learning skills that will last them a lifetime.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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