

An Ounce of Prevention

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The Surprising Secret to Raising a Well-Behaved Kid

By Robin Westen

The key to smart discipline is simple: Teach your child how to control his/her own behavior so you don't have to.

Kids Can Discipline Themselves

My friend Emily has three amazingly well-behaved children. They put their toys away when she tells them to, go to bed without a fuss, and even settle their own disputes. I actually witnessed her 3-year-old son calmly ask for a truck back from a friend who had yanked it out of his hands.

Emily admits that her children have their moments -- "They are kids, after all!" -- but says that real discipline challenges are few and far between. "What's your secret?" I once asked, hoping she could impart some much-needed wisdom. "Threatening them with punishment? Giving them time-outs? Bribing them with Oreos?" Emily shook her head. "Nothing like that," she told me. "If I've done anything right, it's that I've made it clear from the get-go what I expect from them. Now, all I have to do is shoot them a look, and they know to discipline themselves."

It may sound too good to be true, but experts agree that Emily has the right idea about teaching kids to behave. "When you make your expectations clear from the time your children are toddlers, they internalize those expectations and begin to expect the same thing from themselves," says Sharon K. Hall, PhD, author of *Raising Kids in the 21st Century*. In other words, since kids are naturally inclined to want to please their parents, they'll try to behave in the way that you've taught them to. In fact, experts say that kids as young as 18 months are empathetic and responsive to their parents' expectations.

Even better news: Teaching self-discipline to a young child isn't as daunting as it sounds. "If you focus on the essentials starting at around age 2, your child will catch on faster, resist less, and ultimately behave better," says Robert Brooks, PhD, coauthor of *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child*. These four essentials will help you raise a kid who can keep her own behavior in check.

Set Firm Rules - and Expect Respect

Kids who believe they can do anything they feel like doing, and get whatever they want, tend to be the ones who act out by whining or throwing a tantrum when their demands aren't met. "Children who understand that there are well-defined boundaries learn how to self-regulate and to respect limits," says Hal Runkel, family therapist and author of *ScreamFree Parenting*.

Tell them why. You don't have to give your children elaborate explanations for why you expect certain behaviors from them. But if your child understands that there are simple reasons for your rules, he'll realize they aren't arbitrary and will be more likely to comply. Tell him, for example, "You need to go to bed at eight o'clock because your body needs a lot of sleep to stay strong and healthy." Or "You have to put away your toys so we'll know where to find them next time you want to play."

Offer lots of praise. "Whether it's making the bed, helping set the table, or letting his sister play with his blocks, make sure you reinforce rule-following by celebrating your child's successes," says Larry J. Koenig, PhD, author of *Smart Discipline*. Say, "It's great that you remembered the rule to make your bed. I'm so proud when you behave like a big boy!" or, "You were so polite to say 'please' when you asked me for that crayon. Good job!" Follow rules yourself. "Hanging your coat in the closet when you get home, putting your dirty dishes in the sink, not screaming when you're frustrated ... doing these things will show children

that just as they have rules to follow, so do you," says Judy Arnall, author of *Discipline Without Distress*. "When kids see you behaving well, they'll want to do the same."

Cultivate a conscience. If a young child feels bad when he hasn't followed your rule, don't immediately try to minimize his discomfort. Feeling a bit of guilt is an essential part of learning to determine right from wrong. "Use it as a teaching opportunity," suggests Dr. Hall. "Say, 'I know you're feeling bad. We all make mistakes, but we try to learn how to act next time.'" Build Problem-Solving Skills

One of the major reasons children behave badly is because they feel frustrated and powerless. "When you give children the tools they need to figure things out on their own, they will behave better because they'll be better equipped to take care of themselves and won't come screaming to you or act out every time they encounter a challenge," says Dr. Brooks.

Let kids make decisions. Give children the opportunity to make choices as soon as they're old enough to understand. Ask, "Do you want to wear your Elmo pajamas or your nightgown?" "Which snack do you want to take to school, an apple or a cheese stick?" Once kids can manage these small decisions, take it up a notch: If your child is fighting with her sister, for example, instead of yelling "Don't do that!" or giving her a time-out, Dr. Brooks suggests asking: "How can you handle this differently?" You may be surprised at the way she will come up with solutions.

Encourage a "try, try again" attitude. "Sure, it's a lot quicker for you to do everything for them, but it's important to let preschoolers practice and succeed without your intervention -- whether it's tying their shoes, putting away toys, or sorting socks in the laundry," says Donna M. Genett, PhD, author of *Help Your Kids Get It Done Right at Home and at School!* Make them think things out. Stretch your child's cognitive skills by challenging him to find answers for himself. For example, when your child asks a question about how to do something, respond with a question of your own: "What do you think you should do?" Such a response will eventually give him confidence in his own ability to figure things out.

Help Kids Practice Patience

No one likes to wait, especially young kids. "Developmentally and neurologically it's difficult because children survive by letting their needs be known immediately," says Michael Osit, EdD, author of *Generation Text: Raising Well-Adjusted Kids in the Age of Instant Everything*. "That's why it's especially important for parents to start teaching patience in the toddler years. You want your kids to develop tolerance for the feeling of impatience, which is often unpleasant, so they won't misbehave or act impulsively when faced with that feeling in the future."

Make them wait. Don't always drop everything as soon as your child asks for something. "Allow your child to feel the unpleasantness of waiting because it's a great change agent," says Dr. Osit. By not giving him the juice immediately, for example, you'll help him get practice in managing his impatience.

Tell them what they're feeling. Toddlers aren't able to express their frustration at having to wait for things, but you can help by labeling their emotions and offering praise when they demonstrate patience. If your preschooler has to wait his turn, you might say: "I know it's tough to just stand here. But you're doing a terrific job. You're being patient, and that's great!" "When you validate your child's struggle with something, it's more likely he'll try harder," says Dr. Brooks.

Engage in activities that promote patience. Encourage your child to do things that don't offer immediate results, like block building and puzzle solving, or planting a flower seed and watching it grow over time. "Make sure they're not only playing with high-tech gadgets that offer instant press-of-a-button results," suggests Dr. Osit.

Put an Emphasis on Empathy

How many times have you had to referee a blowup because your preschooler took a friend's toy or refused to share with her sister? "Children are born believing that the world revolves around them," says Steven E. Curtis, PhD., author of *Understanding Your Child's Puzzling Behavior*. "So the sooner you help them understand that everybody has feelings and emotions, the less likely they'll be to behave in ways that annoy or hurt other people."

Celebrate your child's acts of kindness. "In general, it's best to find natural opportunities to teach empathy," says Lisa Aaron, MD, child psychiatrist with Westchester Jewish Community services, in White Plains, New York. "Any time your child shows regard for someone else, you should reinforce her inclination with a simple narrative. For example, if you see your preschooler covering her doll with a blanket, say, 'it was so kind of you to make sure that your dolly is warm and cozy. She must have been very cold.'"

Ask, don't tell. You can't explain empathy to a toddler, but you can begin to get her thinking about other people's feelings. "Kids this age won't understand lectures, but if you pose questions to them you can raise their awareness level," says Dr. Curtis. For instance, if your child won't let her friend play with her stuffed animals, ask, "How do you think Emma-Rose feels when you won't share your things with her?"

Help them read body language. Being able to interpret gestures and facial expressions is one of the basic ways that we develop empathy. Give your toddler pointers: "See how Aunt Margaret looked when you shared your cookie with her. Did you notice that she was smiling? You made her feel so good." Your child may not fully understand at first, but when she does, she'll be clued in to other people's reactions -- and better able to notice how her own behavior can affect others.

Finally, a word of caution: You aren't going to be able to teach your children to discipline themselves overnight. No doubt there will be times when they misbehave, no matter how hard you've tried to prevent it. "They are kids, after all," as my friend Emily said. But if you continue to focus on these messages, sooner or later the lessons will sink in. As they do, your well-behaved child will need less and less intervention from you.

It's Not My Fault

Accepting the blame and taking responsibility are learned skills. Start teaching them now.

By Sally Marshall

"I didn't do it!" My 7 year-old daughter, Coco, recites that phrase like a mantra. Her explanations for why she's blameless fall into three main categories: Someone hit her first, it was the other kid's idea, or some adult (usually me) was responsible.

I used to let these comments slide, figuring every child her age blames others when something goes wrong. But when she said "I didn't break the cup-my hand did," I knew I had to teach her to own up to her behaviour.

"Kids this age have difficulty taking responsibility for their actions and behaviour, especially when they think their parents would disapprove of something they did," says Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Ph.D, Professor of child development at Columbia University Teachers College, in New York City. Since they are still not adept at anticipating consequences, admitting culpability can be daunting. For school-age children, understanding rules and consequences is still a developmental work in progress, says K. Mark Sossin, Ph.D, professor of psychology at Pace University, in New York City.

Even if you know why your child is reluctant to admit that she's done something wrong, you may be baffled by the strange things she says when confronted with something that's obviously her doing. Keep in mind that, for most children, accepting responsibility is a learned behavior, like manners or taking turns. So the next time you run into one of the following situations, use it as an opportunity to teach her how to react appropriately.

Your son knows the rule is to never touch the papers you bring home from the office, but he doddles on them anyway. When you confront him he claims "it was an accident." Resist the temptation to yell, punish, or try to force him to admit that he did it on purpose--none of those responses will teach him to own up

to his mistakes, says Dr. Sossin. Instead, let him know the real consequences his doodling has for you-and him. You might say, "Now I have to print this whole thing out again, so I won't have time to play checkers." Then ask him to help you fix the problem or keep you company as you do it so he has an opportunity to make things right. Remember, from your kid's perspective, this probably was an accident in that he didn't understand the impact of his actions. By allowing him to experience the results of his behaviour, rather than feel ashamed or defensive, you'll help him learn to do the right thing.

Your daughter is running around the house, falls, and then blames you because she tripped over her untied shoelaces. Though it's maddening to be the fall guy, don't take it personally. Just ask, "What can we do so that doesn't happen again?" says Dr. Sossin. Listen to her ideas and then make a suggestion of your own like, "why don't we practice making a double knot so your shoes won't keep coming untied?" Do this often enough and she'll start looking for a solution when things go wrong--rather than playing the blame game.

You see your son pull his sister's hair. He says she made him do it, because she hit him first. "I'll tell my kids that they're in charge of themselves- not blaming others," says Lee Mackenzie, of Mason, Ohio. Don't play judge and jury just make sure your child understands that no matter what another kid does he's still responsible for his actions? When the heat of the moment has passed, ask your son what he thinks a good response might be the next time someone makes him angry. It's more likely to stick if he comes up with it himself. Finally, encourage empathy: "How does it feel when someone pulls your hair?"

Your daughter ransacks your jewelry box and even though she denies it, you're sure she did it. "I always tell my 7-year-old daughter that I'll be angrier if she tells me a story than if she tells the truth," says Amy Ramson, of New York City. How do you get a kid to confess? Try non-accusatory statement such as: "That's an interesting explanation, but I'm waiting to hear what actually happened." Then matter-of-factly go about your business. Most kids will come forward if they aren't put on the defensive. But once you get your confession, make sure you applaud her honesty--even if there's a consequence for her deed.

Net News

Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful.

To Raise Resilient Kids, Be a Resilient Parent

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/well/family/to-raise-resilient-kids-be-a-resilient-parent.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>

Screen time 'may harm toddlers'

<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-47026834>

Audio Link American Academy of Pediatrics Says No More Spanking or Harsh Verbal Discipline

<https://edhub.ama-assn.org/jn-learning/audio-player/17159064>

Self- Help Corner:

Alcoholics Anonymous: 780-424-5900

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Al-Anon/Alateen: 780-433-1818

Support Network / Referral Line: 211

Distress Line: 780 482-4357

Cocaine Anonymous: 780-425-2715

Informative Links:

The National Women's Health Information Center:

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/>

Active Living Website: <http://www.centre4activeliving.ca>