

Breaking Your Bad Discipline Habits

By Dr. Marianne Neifert, Parenting

Kids aren't the only ones whose behavior can be frustrating at times. If you asked your child, he'd probably tell you that you can be pretty annoying, too, especially when it comes to discipline. Even worse, you probably know how awful you sound when you nag, yell, or threaten your child with some unreasonable consequence. How did it get this way?

Maybe you're just too tired to come up with new ways to deal with your child's misbehavior. Or maybe a technique worked a few times and you're still using it, even if it's no longer effective. With some patience (with yourself and your child) you can learn to discipline more positively.

Nagging

We all nag. And we all know how fruitless it is. Either your child resorts to fibbing ("I did wash my hands! Really!") or she learns to tune you out.

What to do instead: Use eye contact and state your expectations as calmly as possible. Fewer words are better. Instead of saying, "How many times do I have to tell you not to eat in the living room?" say, "No eating in the living room." When you want to remind your child to do something, try using a single word, such as "bedtime."

Whenever possible, tie your request to something your little one wants to do: "After you help me put the puzzle away, then we can play outside." And try not to load up on commands. It's better for her to do one thing (put on her shoes) than hear a whole string of orders.

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Yelling

What's true of nagging is doubly true of yelling -- we all do it, and we all feel guilty every time we do. Even if it does occasionally get results, it just teaches your child that it's okay to raise his voice when he's angry.

What to do instead: Scold him. Your child really does need to know what he's done wrong, as long as you don't raise your voice or lose your temper. A proper scolding names the misbehavior ("No splashing water while you're in the tub"), offers an explanation for the limit ("Water on the floor makes a mess"), enforces the established consequence for the misbehavior ("If you don't stop splashing now, I'll have to take you out of the bath"), and offers an acceptable alternate ("You can pour water into this cup or back into the tub").

Turning Requests Into Questions

When I was a medical student, I learned not to ask my young patients, "May I look in your ears now?" since more often than not they'd reply, "No!" and cover their ears. But it's a hard habit to break, especially after months of asking your baby rhetorical questions as a way of making conversation -- "How about a little breakfast now? Doesn't that sound good?"

What to do instead: State, don't ask. Your tone of voice and choice of words can go a long way in promoting cooperation, so remember to frame your expectations in a polite, respectful manner by adding "please" and "thank you": "I need you to turn off the TV now and start getting ready, please."

Issuing Empty Warnings

A good warning can be an effective discipline strategy. The problem comes when you threaten in anger, grossly exaggerate ("If you do that again, I'm not taking you outside all day"), or fail to be specific ("You'll be sorry!").

Similarly, delayed threats ("If you don't stop throwing the ball, we won't go to the library this afternoon") lose their impact on a toddler or a preschooler, who's too focused on the present moment to remember what she did two minutes ago. The result? It will seem as though there's no consequence for her naughty behavior. And if you do impose a penalty later, it will just seem harsh and arbitrary.

What to do instead: Make your warnings more specific and immediate. ("I'm warning you. If you don't give that toy back to your baby sister, I'm going to have to put you in time-out.") Use a calm, firm tone of voice that makes it clear you're in control. And if your toddler won't behave, carry out your punishment without further ado, perhaps adding "Sounds like you've chosen the time-out."

Making Unrealistic Promises

Whether it's asking for a toy you don't really approve of or a visit to some expensive place, kids often make difficult requests. Instead of giving an honest response, however, we try to avoid conflict by offering them a vague answer like "We'll see." But avoiding the issue only leaves your child frustrated and feeling as if he isn't being taken seriously. What to do instead: Bite the bullet -- especially if the item he wants is totally out of the question. But give him an explanation. For instance, if he's asking for a Game Boy, say, "I know your friends have them and you'd like one too. But I just don't think it's a good toy for kids your age."

And if your preschooler's request isn't totally unreasonable, acknowledge his desire. For example, if he wants to go to the beach, let him know that you'd find that fun too. Then you can say, "I can't promise that we'll go next summer, but when Dad and I are figuring out where to go on vacation, we'll talk to you about it too."

Apologizing Too Much

Saying sorry when you've made a mistake is an act that strengthens your bond with your kids. But even a young child can sense when your apology isn't heartfelt, and constantly saying sorry for the same mistake wears thin.

I'll never forget an incident that occurred after I had apologized (again) to my children for harping on them during our usual Saturday-morning housecleaning routine. My oldest child, Peter, then 10, looked at me and calmly inquired, "Mom, why do you keep apologizing every week? Why don't you just stop doing it?" After my initial startled reaction, I took his advice to heart, hired a cleaning service, and quit arguing with my kids over household chores. (I wasn't surprised when Peter later became a psychiatrist!)

What to do instead: Make a genuine effort to cut back on, for instance, yelling. There are actually two parts to an apology -- your words and your actions. So if you find yourself apologizing repeatedly for the same infraction, try to gain some perspective by talking to your mom or a friend with slightly older children.

Giving the Cold Shoulder

While removing a privilege can be an effective penalty, turning away from your child when she wants to kiss and make up or giving her the silent treatment after she's misbehaved can make her feel unworthy of your love and affection. Or pretending to walk on when your toddler's dawdling may get her to hurry back to your side, but such tactics prey on her fear of abandonment.

What to do instead: Tell your child how upset you are. Just do it calmly without making her feel rejected. Your aim is to make it clear that it's the behavior that's driving you crazy, not her. If you can't keep your feelings in check, tell her you still love her and you'll discuss her behavior later, when you've had a chance to simmer down.

It's easy to fall into a discipline rut. So every once in a while, take a moment to think about the ways you get your child to behave and whether you need to update your techniques. After all, the more positive interactions you have with your kids, the happier everyone will be.