



American Academy of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

Discipline Methods

There are times when your child will test your limits and rules. At these times, how you respond is as important as the ground rules you've established. When your child does misbehave, try the following techniques. Not only will they encourage your child to cooperate now, but they will teach him or her how to behave in the future as well.

Natural Consequences

When a child sees the natural consequences of his/ her actions, he/ she experiences the direct results of her choices. (But be sure the consequences do not place her in any danger.) For example, if your child spills her milk on purpose, he/she will not have milk to drink. If she throws and breaks her toy, she will not be able to play with it. It will not be long before your child learns not to spill her milk and to play carefully with her toys.

When you use this method, resist the urge to lecture your child or to rescue him (by getting more milk, for example). Your child will learn best when he/she learns for himself/herself and will not blame you for the consequences he/she receives.

Logical Consequences

Natural consequences work best, but they are not always appropriate. For example, if your child does not pick up his/her toys, they may be in the way, but chances are he/she will not care as much as you do. In this situation, you will need to step in; creating a consequence that is closely connected to his/ her actions. You might tell him/her that if he/she does not pick up her toys, then you will put them away — but he/she will not play with them again for a whole day.

When you use this method, it is important that you mean what you say and that you are prepared to follow through *immediately*. Let your child know that you are serious. You do not have to yell and scream to do this. You can say it in a calm, matter-of-fact way.

Withholding Privileges

In the heat of the moment, you will not always be able to think of a logical consequence. That is when you may want to tell your child that, if he/she does not cooperate, he/she will have to give something up he/she likes. The following are a few things to keep in mind when you use this technique:

- Never take away something your child truly needs, such as a meal.
- Choose something that your child really likes.
- Be sure you can follow through on your promise.

Time-Out

Time-outs should be your last resort and you should use it only when other responses do not work. Time-outs work well when the behavior you are trying to punish is clearly defined and you know when it occurred. Time-outs can be helpful if you need a break in the action (for example, if your child is hitting a sibling or friend). You can use a time-out with a child as young as one year old. Follow these steps to make a time-out work:

1. Choose a time-out spot. This should be a boring place with no distraction, such as a chair. (Bathrooms can be dangerous and bedrooms may become playgrounds). Decide what two or three behaviors will be punished with time-out and explain this to your child.
2. When your child does something he/she knows will result in a time-out, you may warn him once (unless it is aggression). If it happens again, send him/her to his time-out spot *immediately*. Tell him what he did wrong in as few words as possible. A rule of thumb is one minute of time-out for every year of your child's age. (For example, a 4-year-old would get a 4-minute time-out.) But even 15-seconds will work. If your child will not go to the spot on his own, pick him up and carry him there. If he will not stay, stand behind him and hold him gently but firmly by the shoulders or restrain him in your lap and say, "I am holding you here because you have to have a time-out." Do not discuss it any further. It should only take a couple of weeks before he learns to cooperate.
3. Once your child is capable of sitting quietly, set a timer so that she will know when the time-out is over. If fussing starts again, restart the timer. Wait until your child stops protesting before you set the timer.
4. When the time is up, help your child return to a positive activity. Your child has "served his/her time." Hug him/her and welcome him/her back. If you need to discuss his/her behavior, wait several minutes before doing so.