

# Discipline (0-12 years)

Parent easy guide 02



Children need discipline, limits and guidance. They need to feel safe and secure while learning to get along with others and learning to live in society. The best discipline leads to children learning self-discipline.

People often confuse 'discipline' with 'physical punishment', but they are quite different. Discipline is about teaching. It is not necessary to physically punish children in order to teach them. Many adults don't always know what to do and tend to treat children the way they were treated.

Discipline guides children to choose what is right through teaching and learning rather than forcing. For most parents the question is how best to achieve this.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.  
Change to suit your child's sex.*

## What is discipline?

Discipline is about teaching and learning and it can be done in many ways.

It involves teaching your child what to do, and setting clear limits about what not to do that your child can understand.

As parents we discipline our children when they are able to understand what we want to teach them, so that they will learn how to discipline themselves. We need to gradually use less limits as our children are able to make responsible decisions for themselves.

- > Discipline builds on your child's wish to please you. It is more likely to produce a well-behaved, contented child, and less stressed parent.
- > Discipline should be positive and used to encourage good behaviour. It should also stop behaviour that you don't want your child to be doing.

## Causes for misbehaviour

Misbehaviour happens for two main reasons:

- > because the child hasn't yet learnt how to do what is expected
- > because it is the way the child is showing his feelings.

For example, your three year old may pull up your favourite plant because he has seen you weeding

and he is trying to be like you. In this case it is an opportunity to teach other very simple ways he can help you in the garden.

On the other hand he may pull up your favourite plant because he is hurt and angry that you are busy with your work and haven't been attending to him. In this case, he is too young to tell you how he feels with words so he tells you with his behaviour - sometimes called 'acting out'.

Children can have a range of feelings in a short space of time. They may find it hard to understand what they are feeling. The younger the child, the harder it is for them to know their feelings.

Many children do not have the words to express their feelings. If their emotions are strong (frustration and anger) and they think that you will not approve they may feel afraid. Children's feelings affect what they do.

If you are reasonable in what you expect of your children and teach them clearly and kindly what you want, they are more likely to be cooperative. If you try to work out the feeling beneath your children's behaviour you are more likely to find out why they misbehave.

The way you talk to your child can affect whether or not he will do as he is told.

Children will learn more by what they see you doing and how you live your life, than by what you tell them.



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## Why is my child behaving this way?

Think about what is happening in your child's world and try to deal with the cause. It may be that:

- > his parents' lives are so busy that he feels left out. He misbehaves to get your attention because angry attention is better than no attention.
- > something is going very wrong for your child, e.g. new baby, problems at school, difficulty in making friends in a new area, scared by parents' arguments, family break up
- > he is trying to cope with changes and feels overwhelmed
- > he is angry and frustrated by something you've done
- > he feels unfairly treated by you and wants to get back at you
- > your parenting style is too strict or very lax
- > your child may be needing more independence than you have allowed.

## What is my child feeling?

You can try to find out what your child is feeling when she misbehaves by watching and thinking about the behaviour and then talking about it. You might say:

- > 'You seem very angry. Can you tell me what's wrong?' or,
- > 'I think you must be hurting inside' or 'Tell me if you need a hug.'

If your child has difficulty talking about feelings it may be helpful to talk about the situation as if it was someone else. You might say:

- > 'When I first started school I felt scared.'
- > 'Lots of children feel disappointed when they don't win.'

With very young children or those unable to talk, you have a more difficult task. Try to discover feelings by watching for facial expressions, learning to know their different cries and thinking about where they were and what was just happening.

## How parents can discipline

It is important to respond to children when they misbehave, and when they behave well.

Methods of discipline need to fit with your child's age, abilities and needs. This may mean you will use different ways for each child within your family. You will need to change them as your child grows older.

Discipline usually needs careful thought and methods which include:

- > planning
- > explaining
- > distracting
- > making rules
- > teaching
- > showing
- > giving choices
- > giving consequences

## Planning

Often with planning you can prevent a behaviour issue from arising. This means taking your needs and your child's needs into account. For example if your toddler always misbehaves when you are shopping, her needs might be - boredom (shopping takes too long), or she is tired or hungry. Your need is to get the shopping done. So your plan might be to shop in short bursts when the shops aren't busy. It may help to shop when your toddler isn't hungry or tired, and to let her help you in some way. Planning is a good way to avoid problems that happen often.

## Making the rules

Thinking about rules that you want for the family is best done before a problem starts. It's best if parents can work together to manage behaviours and the types of responses you'll give. Older children are more likely to accept family rules and consequences if they are involved in making them with you.

When telling your child what you want him to do make sure you:

- > **have only a few rules** because too many rules can be confusing
- > **are clear**, e.g. 'No' to your toddler without telling why it's wrong means little to him and he is likely to do it again. If you give too much information at once he won't remember and if you don't give enough he won't know what to do.
- > **both understand what you mean**, e.g. 'Be polite' may not mean anything to a very young child. Your older child may have a different understanding of the same word.
- > **choose your time well**, e.g. trying to teach your son while he is watching his favourite television program is not likely to work.
- > **know what your child is able to do**, e.g. if the task is too hard your child may fail and you may feel disappointed or angry.
- > **are prepared for a difference of opinion** if you give a choice, e.g. the question 'Do you want to come with me?' can lead to your child replying with a 'No'. Don't give your child a choice if there isn't one.
- > **don't give mixed messages** to your child, e.g. the way you look can give a different message from what you say. Laughing at your son's behaviour while you say 'No' may be unclear if you approve or not.
- > **back up what you say with action**. If you do not follow through what you said would happen if he disobeyed, your child is likely to disobey next time.

## Giving consequences

Learning about consequences (what happens when we do something) is an important part of discipline and will help teach your child responsibility. When you set rules everyone needs to be clear about the consequences. This is best done when you're feeling as calm and in control as you can be.

- > Consequences should be short. They need to happen as soon as possible after the misbehaviour, or they will lose their meaning.
- > They can be natural, e.g. when your child leaves her toys in a mess the natural consequence is not being able to find what she wants.
- > They can be given by you, e.g. when your child's bike is run over because it was left on the driveway she has to share the cost of repairs or do without it for a time.
- > Consequences should be linked to the original problem where possible e.g. when your child makes a mess she should clean it up. This means that your child is learning how people can make up for mistakes.
- > Consequences should be small. If you use a major consequence your child may think it's unfair and not respond. Consequences should fit the behaviour and help your child to know how to do it better.
- > Consequences should always be safe for your child.

## 'Time out'

Some parents use 'Time Out' which means being apart from what has been happening in order to think about it. This can be in the same room or a separate place and can be for your child or for yourself. The length of 'Time Out', the age of your child and what is happening are all very important.

It is never helpful to use 'Time Out' for children under the age of three years. For those older, allow one minute for every year of your child's age.

'Time Out' can be used to give children time to think about their behaviour, what they have done wrong and what they can change. Some children can see this as punishment and for some this can be a frightening time and not useful.

It is often more helpful to remove your child from a difficult situation and keep her with you for a while. It is especially important for an adult to stay near if your child's feelings are very strong.

There are times, especially when children are very young, that stressed parents are unable to cope with children's behaviour without getting very angry and losing control. At times of great stress a brief separation may be the best thing to do for your child's sake. Make sure you leave her in a safe situation.

## 'Time in'

'Time in' can be a more positive and effective way of teaching than 'Time Out'. It means to remove your child from the situation that she cannot manage and to spend time with an adult. Keep her with you while you help to settle her, or just hold her, until she is able to get calm again. This is teaching time. It says to your child that you will not let her do anything to harm herself or others and that you will not let her feelings drive you away or overwhelm you. By being with her through this you are teaching her to manage feelings and difficult situations.

## Physical punishment

### What do we mean?

There are many terms used to describe physical punishment. These include 'smacking', 'hitting', 'spanking', 'beating', 'belting', 'squeezing', 'whipping', 'thrashing', 'punching' - with a hand or object. Usually 'corporal punishment' and 'caning' is used when talking about physical punishment in schools. Corporal punishment is not allowed in any State school in South Australia.

### What does the law say?

The law says that harsh or excessive physical punishment of children is illegal and considered to be child abuse. (Children's Protection Act 1993).

### Some things to consider from the research

- > while an occasional mild smack may not cause harm, the danger is the possibility of accidental injury or loss of control by the parent (a smack may lead to more smacking next time or a serious belting as the parent senses that the first smack did not work).
- > an immediate hit may stop your child's behaviour for the moment, but she will probably repeat it (she doesn't learn what to do instead, only what not to do).
- > children learn not to do the action in the adult's presence, rather than learn not to do it at all
- > children's feelings of anger and hurt are often so strong after being hit that they can have difficulty remembering the reasons for the punishment
- > if punishment is frightening, your child can learn ways to deceive (lying, cheating or blaming others) to avoid being hit
- > some children can become fearful, anxious, rebellious, or withdrawn
- > children tend to copy what you do and may bully others
- > it teaches children that violence is acceptable and that it's okay to use violence when you're angry, to solve problems or to get what you want.

Most people would agree that settling conflict between adults with physical force is wrong. It is against the law to hit (assault) other people, e.g. adults, partners, apprentices.

There are more effective ways of disciplining children than using physical punishment.

## What else to do

Here are some positive things to do.

- > Make sure that your relationship with your child is positive and if it isn't, work on getting it better.
- > Teach what you want (say it clearly and show for a young child). Reinforce when your child cooperates.
- > Distract or offer alternatives if your child is doing something you don't like instead of saying 'Don't'.
- > Give your child a choice of something similar he can do, e.g. 'You can play your drum outside or play a quiet game in here'.
- > Use consequences - helping your child to learn from what she has done.
- > Ignore things that don't matter. They are more likely to stop if no one notices.
- > Think about what you are about to say - how would you feel if an adult spoke to you in this way?

Note: Giving lots of attention to behaviour we don't like can often reinforce it. Make sure that you notice more of your child's good behaviour and comment on this rather than the bad behaviour. For example, are you missing what your child is doing well - cleaning his teeth, getting dressed for school, eating his dinner, playing happily with his friend, sharing with his brother? Look for it and comment.

## Discipline for different ages

Discipline is about teaching and learning, so think about what is the best way to achieve this given your child's age, understanding, and needs.

### Babies (0-1 year old)

It is a waste of time and likely to be harmful to use any kind of discipline on babies. They are completely unable to think ahead, understand reason or remember what you want. Instead, prevent damage (remove things) and prevent danger (remove the baby).

Gentleness, loving touches and words are as important as feeding and clothing babies. They need to learn that the world around them is friendly and protective and that they can trust you.

Whatever your baby does, it is not to 'get at' you.

### Crawlers and toddlers (1-3 years)

At this age children are full of life and curiosity. They learn through touch and trying things out and this often means making mess or using things in the wrong way. They want to do things their own way and say 'No' as they learn to become separate individuals. They often get frustrated because they want to do more than they can.

- > Teach and show your child new skills with patience and praise.
- > Keep it simple - one 'new' lesson at a time.
- > Distract them by giving them something else interesting to do. Rather than 'Don't touch the TV' try 'Here's that favourite book of yours?'

- > Talk in a positive way instead of a negative one, e.g. 'Hold the cup with two hands' instead of 'Don't spill your drink!'
- > Avoid battles, particularly with eating and toilet training. Children will eat what they need if given a choice of healthy foods (unless ill). Do not spend energy scolding when it is possible to divert the storm by saying 'You've had enough? Okay, let's get you down from the high chair'.
- > Where possible give two choices (more are likely to confuse) so that children can make some small decisions of their own, e.g. 'Do you want to wear the blue or brown socks?'
- > Toddlers cannot yet respond to consequences by changing behaviour but you can repeat and show skills together, e.g. 'When we make a mess we help clean it up'. You will need to repeat this if it happens again - 'Remember when we make a mess what do we do?'
- > Toddlers do not understand punishment and can react with fear or defiance rather than learning. Stop them by interrupting what they are doing and talk softly but firmly, and provide some distraction.
- > Pick your child up when she won't come. Lift her to safety if she's in danger. Hold her until she calms down.
- > Whenever you can, set things up for her to do what you want her to do, e.g. 'Let's see if you can pick up the toys and put them in the box before I make your bed' rather than 'I want you to put your toys away now'.
- > The more your toddler feels competent, in control and able to manage, the calmer and easier to manage she will be.

### Preschoolers (3-4 years)

By three to four years children will be able to understand most of your instructions and be able to predict the results of many actions. They are usually able to begin to share and play socially with others. Children at this age are easily excited, like to be in control, and can sometimes be bossy. Expect some 'showing off' and silliness, for this is an age of copying others, finding fun in being shocked and trying out new words (including swear words if they have heard them).

If your child has reached this age feeling that you are loving and approving, he will, most of the time, want to please you and will behave as he knows you would like. On the other hand if he reaches this age feeling you are overpowering, demanding and not 'on his side', he may find it difficult to do the things you want because he can never please you.

- > Your child needs to learn that there is no point in making a scene or nagging to get what he wants and that you will stand firm once you have said 'No'.
- > Think before you say 'No' but be sure you mean it. If, under pressure, you say something that later you realise is wrong it is important to apologise and explain why you changed your mind.
- > Give alternatives, e.g. 'You can throw your ball but not your teddy'.

- > Consequences need to be short or they lose their meaning, e.g. 'If you leave your toys out I will put them away until after tea' or 'If I have to pick up your toys we won't have time to go to the park'.
- > The easier you make it to please, the more likely your child will try.
- > Notice and praise your child when he is doing what you want. Pay more attention when your child behaves well than when he's troublesome.
- > Explain and show how to do what you want, e.g. 'When we see a friend we are polite, so I would like you to say 'Hello Mrs Jones'. Some children may not know what they have to do if you just say, 'Be polite'.
- > 'No' should be a word you use very little.

### Children of primary school age (5-12 years)

Children need parents to explain to them about adult behaviours and feelings, and why you react as you do. They understand much more about themselves but are still trying to sort out the good bits from the bad bits. They can often go through periods when they are very quiet and good or very restless. They learn about keeping to rules and not cheating. They learn to see things from another's point of view.

- > Always remember to teach what you want your children to do and give choices.
- > Talk with your child about a wide range of topics. Listen to his views and be willing to discuss different opinions rather than forcing your ideas on him.
- > Children at this age can understand and accept consequences. If your child shares in making some of the rules and the consequences for when they are broken, they will begin learning self-discipline.
- > If a rule is broken, the consequence should follow.
- > Try to be in step with other parents who have children the same age. If you are too far away from what most parents do, you will have difficulty getting your child to cooperate.
- > Give rewards for good behaviour - children love being given a bonus, e.g. offer a favourite outing for having kept their bedroom tidy.
- > Teach your child how to work out ways to solve problems. This is a useful skill at this age and an important step towards learning self discipline.

### Reminders

- > Children need discipline.
- > Discipline is about teaching and learning.
- > Discipline works best when you have a good relationship with your child.
- > Plan to prevent problems when you can.
- > Discipline includes rules and consequences.
- > Plan rules and consequences ahead of problems - before a crisis.
- > Don't make consequences so long or harsh that they lose their meaning.
- > You can discipline without using physical punishment.
- > Talk to other parents about their rules.
- > Spend energy on the really important things and learn to overlook minor irritations.
- > Think about what you expect - is it reasonable?
- > Few parents enjoy being in the company of angry, frustrated, crying children. Think about what you can do differently.

## Contacts

Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Centres: Tel 1300 733 606  
9am - 4:30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment at your local Centre

## Websites

[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

For other Parent Easy Guides including: Lies and fibs, Self-esteem, Discipline (teens), Being a parent, Sibling rivalry, Children biting, Tantrums

[www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

For parenting and child health information

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## For more information

**Parent Helpline 1300 364 100**

**Parenting SA**  
**Children, Youth and Women's Health Service**  
**Telephone (08) 8303 1660**  
**Internet: [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

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**Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia**

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