

Discipline: Teaching Limits with Love

Parents' Action for Children

*wishes to thank the American
Academy of Pediatrics for permission
to use its information as a vital resource
for the research of this booklet.*



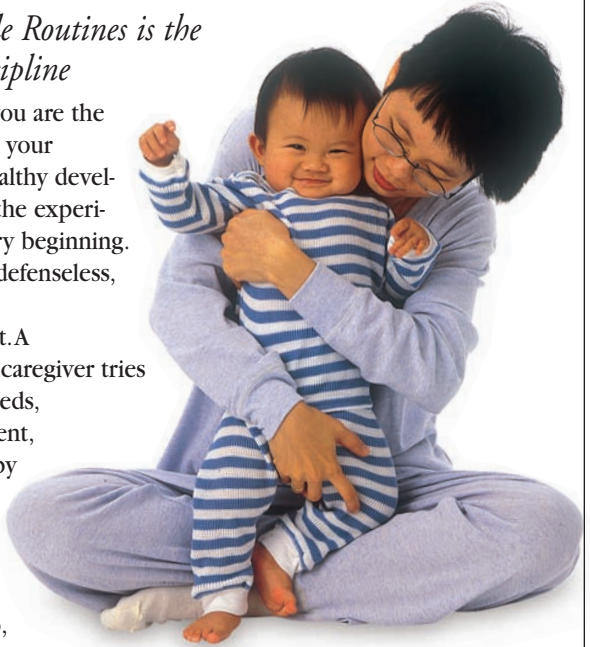
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► Discipline: Teaching Limits With Love

After love, discipline is the most important gift we give our children. It is also one of the most difficult jobs parents and caregivers face. Discipline is teaching, not punishing. When you stop a child from doing something, you are teaching an important lesson: "Every time you do this, I must stop you until you can learn to stop yourself." If you do this in a loving and consistent way, your child will eventually learn to set her own limits and will carry those lessons throughout her life.

Providing Dependable Routines is the Earliest Form of Discipline

As a parent or caregiver, you are the most important person in your baby's life. Your child's healthy development is influenced by the experiences he has from the very beginning. A baby is vulnerable and defenseless, dependent upon you for love, food, and comfort. A nurturing and responsive caregiver tries to understand a baby's needs, and responds in a consistent, dependable manner. A baby learns that if he is hungry he will be fed, if he is wet he will be changed, if he is tired he will be put down to sleep, and when he is overwhelmed



with feelings he cannot yet manage, he will be comforted. When a baby's needs are met in a loving and predictable way, it teaches him that his world has structure. This is the beginning of discipline.

You Cannot Spoil an Infant

Babies don't cry to manipulate you or win a power struggle. They cry because they are trying to tell you, in the only way they can, what they need at that moment. If your baby is crying, she is hungry, tired, wet, or in pain and she is asking you for help. The most important thing for you to do is to respond to her in a loving way.

► The Need for Limits Begins

When a baby reaches eight or nine months he has become a bundle of energy and exploding curiosity. He has started to move around better on his own, allowing him to crawl into all kinds of new and potentially dangerous situations. At this age babies want to touch, move and taste everything. It's an exciting time - they're learning about everything around them. A child learns by "testing" the limits that are set for him.



Don't mistake this limit testing for "bad" behavior; he is just curious. Try not to discourage him from his active exploration. He is doing exactly what he should be by trying to understand his surroundings. He is learning and loving it, so try and celebrate that learning with him.

Your most important job during this time of exploration is to make sure your child is physically safe. Baby-proof any area your child has access to at this stage. Remove dangerous or breakable objects and all medicines, cover light sockets, install baby gates or barriers at stairways and, if necessary, install baby-proof latches on cupboards and toilets.

Setting Limits at Nine to Twelve Months

Your baby is always "testing" limits, and she is very anxious to see just how far she can go. At this stage she is probably starting to walk and she is thrilled with this new skill. She is trying to develop a clear sense of what is and isn't allowed, and she needs a consistent and calm "no" when she does something that might be dangerous or inappropriate. She learns about the world by the way that you respond to her actions.

When children do something that you don't like, try to redirect their attention. It's very easy to distract children at this age. For example, if a child goes to touch something she shouldn't, you can calmly and gently move her from the forbidden object to an area where her toys are. You can tell her to choose one of her toys to play with, or you can read her a book or sing her a song. It is very likely that she will change her focus from the forbidden object and pay attention to the new activity.

Setting Limits at One - Two Years

Limits are crucial for a child during this period. He is developing a real sense of independence and may no longer be the sweet, smiling, and obedient child that you have come to know. Simple everyday routines like diapering, dressing, eating, and napping can become a struggle. It's important not to think of setting and enforcing limits as battles - remember they are opportunities for a child to learn.

Getting a toddler to go to sleep can be a real challenge. The most helpful way to avoid bedtime struggles is to create a regular sleep schedule for your child and try to stick to it. Your child should be taking naps and going to bed at about the same time every day. Establishing predictable and routine sleep schedules helps children learn to fall asleep more easily, and also helps them put themselves back to sleep when they wake up during the night.

Try to avoid activities before bedtime that may get your child excited, such as playing video games or watching television. If your child has quiet time before he prepares for bed, then you are less likely to have to struggle to get him into his pajamas and to sleep. Make bedtime quality time. Tell him stories, read books to him, or sing quiet songs. Just before your child goes to sleep is a wonderful time for hugging and cuddling.

Mealtimes can be difficult with toddlers, but there are things you can do to help avoid struggles when it's time to eat. Toddlers can be picky eaters, and it's important not to force-feed them. If your child refuses to eat something it might be because she's not hungry, or that she's had enough to eat. A toddler's tastes change over time - she might not like something one day and then decide she loves it the next. Mealtimes will be easier if a parent isn't shouting, lecturing, or pushing a child into eating something she doesn't want. Be sure to offer new food choices, but don't push too hard. Let her help you in the kitchen when you're preparing meals - toddlers like to help and it teaches them responsibility. Let children feed



themselves if they want to, even though it might be messy. Don't expect them to sit through an entire meal - they might not be able to handle it. They can get bored and act up, so make your expectations reasonable. Be patient, and enjoy her company during mealtimes.

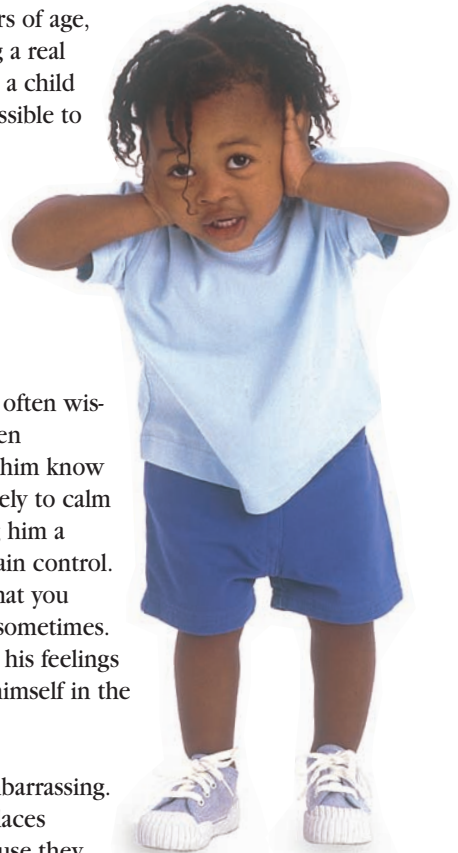
► Tantrums

When a child reaches one to two years of age, tantrums begin to occur, presenting a real challenge for every parent. It's normal for a child to have "meltdowns" and it's simply impossible to avoid them. A child having a tantrum is a child out of control and overwhelmed with feelings. Stay calm - it will help calm your child. The more upset you get the more likely your child is to stay upset. Teaching limits also involves teaching emotional control.

When a child is clearly out of control, it's often wisest to make sure he can't hurt himself, then simply walk out of the room after letting him know why you are about to leave. He is very likely to calm down soon after you leave. You are giving him a chance to stop his own behavior and regain control. When he is able to listen, let him know that you understand that he gets angry and upset sometimes. You're beginning to help him understand his feelings and teaching him how to better control himself in the future.

Public tantrums can be confusing and embarrassing. Children often have tantrums in public places because they are over-stimulated, or because they want their parent's attention. Stay calm - an angry adult will only prolong the outburst. Often a parent will have to calmly remove a child from a public place, letting her know that it's not okay to act that way. If you have a car, take your child to the car and let her "have it out" safely there.

Parents and caregivers need to be aware of how they speak to children when conflicts arise. It is important not to make a child feel bad about himself by saying such things as "You're a bad boy," or "What's wrong with you?" You must let



a child know that while you don't approve of his behavior at the time, you still love him. The message you are trying to get across is, "I love you, but I don't like what you're doing right now."

Two to Three Years

By now, a child has begun to develop a much more complex sense of self. Language is an important part of the third year. A child can now say what she wants and how she feels, and she can begin to argue and negotiate with you. At this stage, a child knows whether or not you mean what you say.

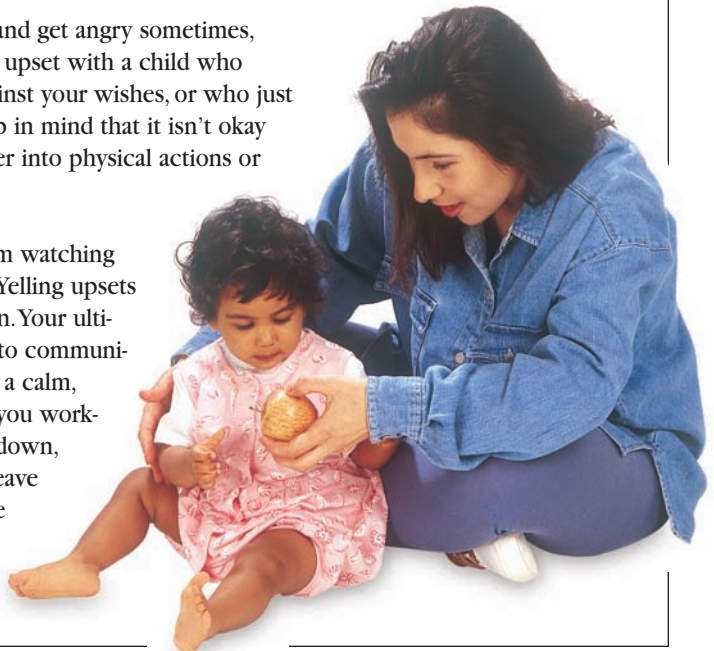
Children are very exact at this age. Be clear and precise when talking to them, and make sure you're explaining what you want them to do in simple terms. Don't just tell them what they can't do, also tell them what they *can* do. For example, if you see your child throwing a toy truck, you can tell him that it's not okay, but that it is okay to play with the truck on the floor or on a chair. If it seems like he needs to throw something, you can suggest he throw a soft toy ball.

Also, make sure you tell a child when she is doing something right. Compliment her for picking up her toys or being gentle with her younger sibling. Make sure she knows you appreciate her; she may be more responsive when you have to correct her behavior at another time.

Anger Management

Parents lose control and get angry sometimes, too. It's normal to be upset with a child who annoys you, goes against your wishes, or who just won't listen. But keep in mind that it isn't okay to translate your anger into physical actions or verbal abuse.

Your child learns from watching and listening to you. Yelling upsets and frightens children. Your ultimate goal should be to communicate your message in a calm, firm way. If she sees you working to calm yourself down, even if you have to leave the room to do it, she will know that it's okay to get



angry, then calm down and regain control before dealing with a situation. Remember that discipline is about teaching; think about what you're teaching your child when you spank her or shame her with words. Physical and verbal punishments may stop the immediate behavior, but the lesson she learns is that it's okay to lose control and hit someone when you are angry, even someone who is much smaller and less powerful than you are. A child can only learn behavior that she sees, and you are her most important role model.

Even though more than 60% of parents recently surveyed feel spanking is an acceptable method of discipline, most experts in child development disagree. The American Academy of Pediatrics officially took a stand against spanking, saying that it is no more effective than other approaches, and that it may well have negative consequences. Some studies have linked spanking to increased aggression in preschool and school age children.

A child need not be hurt to learn. In fact, he may be so upset by this kind of punishment that he won't experience anything but shame, helplessness, and anger - anger that may surface later against others.

Instead of spanking or yelling, try giving your child a "time-out." It's important to respond to an incident immediately after it occurs, otherwise your child won't be able to make a connection between his behavior and your reaction to it.

You can make a "time-out" a positive learning experience by making it a time for him to take a break from the overwhelming events, to think a bit about what happened, or to just sit quietly.

Understand that your power is great - your child wants to please you, especially if you're fair and you respect him.

Most importantly, after a struggle with your child, have a time for apologies and forgiveness; it's a good time to "reconnect."

Explain to him why you thought his behavior was unacceptable and talk about how he can avoid that behavior in the future - this gives him a chance to set his own limits next time.



► Tips for Effective Discipline

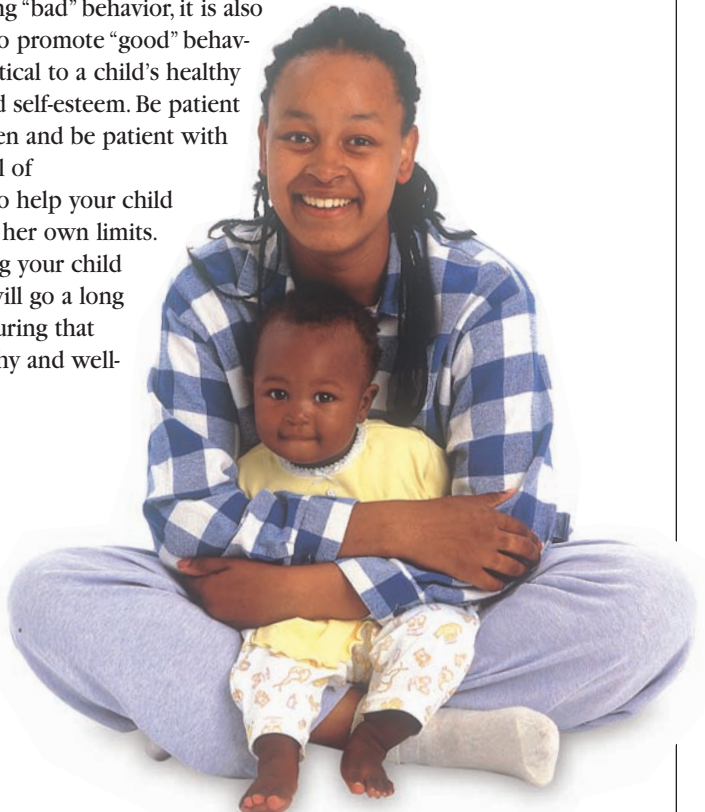
- Create dependable, predictable routines: Babies and children need regular sleep schedules and feeding schedules. A child feels safe when he understands that he will be helped to control himself when he can't do it on his own, and that there are certain routines that he can count on as reliable and consistent.
- Try to understand what your child is communicating to you and respond appropriately: Your baby cries when she is tired, hungry or uncomfortable because it's the only way for her to communicate. Try to figure out what it is that she needs, and respond in a loving way.
- Encourage exploration and curiosity, but keep your child safe: A child learns by "testing" the limits that are set for him. Babies are like little scientists; they are looking for cause and effect. Understand that they are excited and curious about the world around them. Limits should include the removal of dangerous objects and securing areas that your baby is exploring.
- Distract and redirect a child's attention when he is doing something you don't like: Try to avoid unnecessary conflict - a constant bombardment of "no" will dull important messages. Instead of getting angry with the child for his behavior, let him know that you don't like what he's doing, and divert his attention to something more positive.
- Avoid labeling the child, label the behavior instead: Be sure to tell your child that you love him, you just don't love what he's doing.
- Reinforce positive behavior: Discipline isn't just a way to eliminate undesirable behavior, it is an opportunity to promote learning and positive self-esteem in your child. Tell a child when she is doing something right. Make sure she knows you appreciate her. If she knows that you appreciate her, she may be more responsive when you correct her behavior at another time.



- Understand that every child is unique: It's important for parents and caregivers to understand that every child is different and can react to situations and stress in different ways. Some children are calm, others are more excitable. Some children learn quickly, while others may need lessons to be repeated many times. Remember that children learn at different paces, so be patient when teaching limits.
- Do not physically or verbally abuse a child: Spanking, hitting, or shouting at a child may end the immediate behavior but a child may be so upset by physical or verbal abuse that he won't learn anything from the experience except anger and humiliation. When parents use physical punishment, a dangerous message is sent to a child - that violence is the way to settle issues.

► Teaching Limits is Love

The most important thing a parent can do for a child is to love them and teach them how to manage their emotions and behavior - which teaches them self-control. Remember that discipline is teaching. It isn't simply a way of eliminating "bad" behavior, it is also an opportunity to promote "good" behavior. Limits are critical to a child's healthy development and self-esteem. Be patient with your children and be patient with yourself. The goal of setting limits is to help your child learn how to set her own limits. You are providing your child with tools that will go a long way towards assuring that she leads a healthy and well-adjusted life.





“Discipline is the second-most important thing after love that you give your child.”

—Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, M.D.



*For more information, or to order the
I Am Your Child series of educational materials,
visit our website at www.parentsaction.org
or call 888-447-3400.*