

# Discipline With Preschoolers\*

The purpose of discipline is to teach your child how to behave, so that your child will have mostly “good” behavior - behavior that is kind and cooperative with others - and not very much “bad” behavior - behavior that is hurtful or uncooperative or “not the way she’s supposed to act.” The bad behavior, or misbehavior, is a normal part of childhood and a normal part of learning how to behave. Your child learns the difference between good and bad behaviors by the ways that you react to them - by the ways you discipline your child.

## Discipline is NOT Just Punishment

Discipline includes

- rewarding good behavior
- ignoring or punishing bad behavior
- explaining to children the reasons for the good behavior

In fact, some children rarely require punishment, because reward and reasoning are so powerful for them. If you try rewards and reasoning and they do not seem to work for a certain problem, mild punishment can be added to rewards and reasoning. Punishment alone doesn’t work to change a problem behavior.

## All Children Require Discipline

Of course, children are born with different personalities, and some children are just naturally easier to manage than others. For some children, ignoring is a huge punishment, whereas other children may require being placed in a corner for major problems. For some children, a smile is an effective reward, whereas other children require rewards that give them a lot of attention.

## How Discipline Works

1. To increase a certain behavior, you reward it
2. To decrease a behavior, you ignore it or punish it
3. When changing a problem behavior, you explain why the opposite good behavior is important

To stop many problems, you can simply reward the opposite behavior. For example, to stop running in the house, you can reward your child for remembering to walk in the house. For some problems, both rewards and punishment are needed - you may need to ignore or punish the problem behavior, reward opposite behaviors, and explain why the opposite behavior is good. For example, if you want your child to whine less often, you could (a) reward your child with praise for “big boy talk” whenever you hear it, (b) ignore your child’s whining every time you hear it, and (c) when you praise your child for “big boy talk,” tell him why it is good to talk like other children his same age.

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## **Types of Rewards**

- Social Rewards:** Praising your child with words and gestures  
*Giving a hug or a high-five, ruffling your child's hair, smiling at your child, telling your child what you liked and why*
- Material Rewards:** Giving your child small toys or special treats that he or she likes  
*Stickers, food treats, favorite dessert, balloons*
- Activity Rewards:** Doing activities with your child that he or she likes  
*Reading to your child, playing a game together, going to the park*

## **Types of Punishment**

- Active Ignoring:** Removing all your attention from your child  
*Not looking at or saying anything at all to your child as long as your child continues a negative behavior - such as whining, using baby-talk, or banging toys*
- Using Natural Consequences:** Allowing your child to understand and experience the natural outcome of his or her misbehavior  
*"Because you threw your toy and broke it, you will not have that toy to play with anymore."*
- Using the "Quiet Chair":** Placing your child in a chair in a corner of a room and letting your child know (a) why he or she is being placed there and (b) what you expect of his or her behavior while in the chair  
*"You threw the toy so you have to sit in the quiet chair. (Take child to the chair.) Sit here quietly until I say you can get up." (Time can vary from 1 to 3 minutes.)*

## **Tips for Rewarding Good Behaviors**

- Remember, behaviors that are rewarded happen more often.
- **Pay attention!!!** It is easy for parents to sometimes "miss" their child's good behavior. Often, parents use the time their children are behaving nicely to pay attention to other things ("Joey has been so good today, I've been able to get all my chores done"). So, sometimes children misbehave because misbehaving gets them your attention. When your child is behaving well, "catch him or her" being good, and let him or her know that you notice it and like it!
- Reward good behaviors that are the opposite of your child's misbehaviors (called *positive opposites*). For example, if your child does not like to share her toys, be on the lookout for times when she *does* share, and reward it!!
- Tell your child why he or she is being rewarded and why the behavior is good.

- Make sure that the reward you are offering your child really is a reward to him or her. That is, if your child is not interested in watching TV, giving him or her an extra 30 minutes of TV time is not a good reward - it will not change his or her behavior.

### **Tips for Punishing Bad Behaviors**

- Punishment should be mild - never hit your child for misbehavior.
- Punish only when you feel *in control* of yourself (i.e., only when you are not very angry).
- Except when you are using active ignoring as the punishment, tell your child *briefly* what behavior is being punished (e.g., "You didn't finish your dinner, so you can't have dessert") - and then say no more about it - children learn reasons for good behavior best after doing good behaviors.