



# Family Issues Facts

---

A FACT SHEET FOR FAMILIES AND PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH FAMILIES

---

## Discipline that Works: The Ages and Stages Approach

Bulletin #4140

“**A**ges and stages” discipline is based on normal changes in your child’s growth and behavior. Children’s behavior changes just like their bodies change — in predictable patterns.

Stages of growth build one upon another, like the circles in a “slinky” toy. Each child grows according to his or her own genetic “time plan,” moving forward toward maturity. As they grow, children switch back and forth between “comfortable” ages or stages and “uncomfortable” ages.

The comfortable stages come when they take in all they’ve learned — all the new and old pieces seem to fit together well. Uncomfortable stages are times of rapid growth and change. Change, for most of us, causes stress and anxiety — discomfort. A child in a time of discomfort may have trouble coping with day-to-day life, may seem extra-sensitive or may argue more.

However, some children are naturally more relaxed. They are easier to discipline, even if they’re at an “uncomfortable” stage.

Other children may be more difficult. They may have more stress at a certain stage of growth.

### The Difference Between Discipline and Punishment

Discipline and punishment are not the same. Discipline is about guiding children in ways that support their development of self-control. It is respectful, accepting and comforting. It enhances self-worth. Punishment is used to hurt. It focuses on the child rather than on the act or behavior.

Discipline is ongoing. It is the way you talk to your child, the way you treat your child, the way you live. It is how you help your children respond to the day-to-day events in their lives.

Examples of discipline for very young children include child-proofing cupboards in the kitchen and bathroom to keep children safe or putting fragile items out of reach.

For school-age children, making sure they have a good snack after school is an example of discipline that helps both them and you cope better with end-of-the-day fatigue.

### Base Discipline on Your Child’s Development

Children change very quickly, especially in the years before they start school. Discipline that works at one stage may not work at another. A child of 2-1/2 is very different from a 3-year-old. At 2-1/2, many children are in an “uncomfortable” stage. They can be very aggressive one minute and withdrawn the next. A key to disciplining a 2-1/2-year-old is to use routines and avoid giving the child choices. By the age of 3, however, many children have reached a much more “comfortable” stage. Discipline at this stage can be much easier and relaxed.

Yet by 3-1/2 years the child may enter another “uncomfortable” time. He or she may have difficulty with changes.

The more you know about normal developmental changes, the more you’ll be able to guide children well. Knowing more about what they are going through also takes some stress off you as a parent.

## Roadblocks to Good Discipline

The six biggest roadblocks to effective discipline are

- 1. confusing discipline with punishment.** Discipline helps children develop self-control and self-esteem. It teaches right from wrong. Punishment might restrain a child temporarily, but it does not teach alternative behavior. Punishment can even damage the parent-child relationship by reducing a child's trust in the parent.
- 2. believing that what works at one time will work all the time.** You need to change the way you discipline your children to keep pace with their natural growth. Different ages and stages, as well as different children, require different techniques.
- 3. thinking that when you have difficulty disciplining a child, you are a "bad" parent.** Don't put yourself down if you don't get the results you want. Think it through and try again.
- 4. believing your children "should" behave a certain way at a certain time.** Children are unique and special. They develop at their own speed, in their own way.
- 5. believing you must "win" every battle.** It is important to "pick your battles." Don't fight over unimportant issues.
- 6. parents disagreeing in front of a child about discipline.** Solve serious disagreements in private.

## The Effect of Negative Behavior Correction

If you treat your children with the same respect and kindness you offer a close friend, they will learn positive behaviors. Negative

methods of behavior correction such as sarcasm, hurtful teasing, verbal abuse, humiliation and physical punishment do not help children learn positive ways of acting. Rather, they create angry children who do not feel very good about themselves.

## Tips for Effective Discipline

Punishment is not a recommended way to teach children self-control. Here are some tips to help you discipline in an effective manner and avoid punishing actions.

- 1. Set reasonable limits.** Setting reasonable limits offers realistic guidelines for children and helps them to feel secure. When you set limits, stick to them and be consistent. If you don't stick to your limits, you will only confuse children and they may misbehave more.
- 2. Use consequences.** Letting children learn from experiences can be very effective if done properly. Parents can tell children ahead of time what the consequences of exceeding limits will be. Remember that consequences give children a choice, and parents must be willing to accept the child's decision.

Consequences can be *natural* or *logical*. *Natural consequences* let children learn the natural order of the world. For example, "If you don't eat, you will be hungry." *Logical consequences* are consequences that are arranged by the parents. For example, "If you don't put your dirty clothes in the hamper, you won't have clean clothes to wear to school."

Consequences are used to teach responsibility and decision-making. The situation itself provides the lesson and helps to develop a sense of accountability.

- 3. Take corrective action as soon as possible.** It is important to correct misbehavior soon after it occurs. Carry out the *logical consequences* you've established for your child. If you don't, what are you really teaching your child?
- 4. Stay calm.** Anger can "turn off" or "tune out" your child. It may make the corrective action ineffective. It may also create unneeded power plays. Any kind of punishment done calmly is more effective than that done in anger.
- 5. Provide a short time to "cool down."** In the past, this has been referred to as a "timeout." The intent is to give both you and your child time to cool down and control any anger you may be experiencing. Remember that this cool-down time should be relatively brief. It is not a punishment. Maintaining or regaining respect and comfort are two important parts of cooling down, for both adults and children. Follow up with the child about his or her behavior.
- 6. Set an example.** Discipline is best taught by example.

## Using Effective Discipline

Implementing effective discipline is not always easy and takes some practice. Don't get discouraged! Remember, if you don't get the results you want, think the situation through and try again.

Discipline is a positive experience that helps children learn to set and follow behavioral limits and develop self-control.

*Prepared by Judith Graham, Extension human development specialist*

**Source:** Ames, L.B. (1992). *Raising Good Kids: A Developmental Approach to Discipline*. Rosemont, NJ: Modern Learning Press.

Age	Development of Emotions	Tips
Infancy	Stable, well-balanced periods occur around 4, 16, 28, 40 and 52 weeks. Periods of imbalance occur often around 8, 20, 32 and 44 weeks.	No discipline needed.
18 months	Acts on impulse. Is insistent, demanding. Not much trouble with own emotions, but has trouble with other people's. Wants own demands met here and now. Not very adaptable or cuddly. Easily frustrated; attention span extremely short. Loves the outdoors and carriage/stroller rides.	Doesn't easily obey direct commands. Get attention by doing something child likes and wants to share. THINGS TO TRY: Pick up and put child where wanted. Distraction.
21 months	More demanding and less adaptable. Dependent. Has strong needs and demands, but cannot communicate them. May resist being touched.	Need for great patience and wise assessment of capabilities; discipline is not the important thing at this age. Arrange to just get smoothly through the day. THINGS TO TRY: Most successful are physical; rearrange the setting to avoid problems. Talking to them usually doesn't work.
2 years	Less demanding. More adaptable. Tends to be quiet and calm. Willing to cuddle and accept affection.	Take advantage of child's rituals, especially at bedtimes; use security items the child likes (thumb, blanket, etc.). THINGS TO TRY: Distract them or change the scene.
2 1/2 years	Great imbalance. Moves between extremes of aggression and withdrawal. Bossy, rigid, selfish, possessive, jealous. Likes sameness, repetition, predictability; changes are very hard, even minor ones; toys, etc. all have a "proper place."	Age of opposite extremes. THINGS TO TRY: Avoid giving choices. Avoid questions that can be answered by no. Use routines. Talk and work fast so child will be doing what is wanted before she or he has time to think and rebel. Anticipate difficult times or situations and avoid if possible; do not expect your child to wait for things or to share easily.
3 years	Often time of emotional calm. May be happy, contented much of the time. Gets along well with others. Likes others and wants to please them.	THINGS TO TRY: Enthusiasm, good-will and common sense.
3 1/2 years	Difficult age. Is uncertain, unsettled, insecure, yet is stubborn, demanding, unwilling or unable to give in or adapt. Tends to be fearful, unhappy. Child's big emotional struggle is with his/her mother (she is the only worthy opponent); enjoys talking/conversation; time of great motor uncertainty and fluctuating fine motor capabilities. At this age, children are much better with almost anyone other than the principal caregiver.	Difficulty making changes. May be good in long periods of play, but very poor at changing from one activity to another. THINGS TO TRY: Simplify changes as much as possible. Avoid head-on clashes. Let him know he is great — the best child ever; emotions may be very fragile; may express fears or anxieties about the dark and animals — support these but do not encourage; use an imaginary companion to help get things done; heavy use of positive phrases: "let's," "how about," and "maybe you could." Give in when things aren't important. Change subject or distract by bringing in something nice so child forgets to object.
4 years	Energetic, out-of-bounds. May go to extremes to test self against others. Often enjoys own impish, humorous ways. May be selfish, rough, impatient, loud. Loves adventure. Socially silly and larger-than-life manners may annoy adults.	Delights in upsetting adults. THINGS TO TRY: Ignore profanity, boasting, super-silly way of talking, if possible; enjoy her silliness and participate; usually likes and respects boundaries and limits; bargaining works well; surprises are good motivators; whispering very effective; praise and compliments work wonders as does the simple art of conversation. Make few rules, but enforce these strictly.

*continued on back*

Age	Development of Emotions	Tips
5 years	Tends to be calm, quiet, well-balanced. Pulls in and usually tries only what he knows he can do, so is comfortably well-adjusted. Friendly, loving, appreciative, wants to please and do the right thing; wants and means to be good; not yet able to admit to wrongdoing and as much as he tries, does not always tell the truth.	Let them know what is and is not reasonable to expect. Many things parents consider bad are often simply immaturities. THINGS TO TRY: Prevention is much better than punishment. If you punish, do so calmly. Child's wish to be good and do the right thing is strong. With luck, there should be relatively little need for punishment.
5 1/2 - 6 years	Highly emotional. Not in good balance. Loves one minute, hates the next. Much confusion and trouble between self and others. May demand, rebel, argue, fight. When in good mood, is cheerful, energetic, enthusiastic. Needs much praise, but behavior often merits criticism. This only makes behavior worse. Not able yet to tell the difference between mine and yours.	Age of extreme imbalance. May be very rude, resistant, defiant. Thrives on head-on clashes. Punish if absolutely necessary, but calmly. THINGS TO TRY: Patience and skill. Ignore refusal or be impersonal when child answers commands with "I won't." Praise — it may not be easy to find something to praise but try hard; avoid resistance and head-on collisions; sidestep issues if possible; bargain; give in on occasion.
6 1/2 years	Behavior quiets down for a few months. Usually relates strongly and warmly to adults close to them. Brief periods of being happy with themselves. Money is becoming of real interest both as an allowance and as a reward. Eager for more possessions.	THINGS TO TRY: Small rewards for little chores or even eating a good meal. Give them "chances" to get a request done. Consenting and bargaining also work well.
7 years	Quiet, rather negative emotions. May be serious, self-absorbed, moody, worrisome, or suspicious. Very sensitive to others' emotions. May feel disliked by others and that they are critical or poking fun. Procrastinates, has a short memory, and is easily distracted; often completely tunes out the outside world.	Obedience problem may be because child is sidetracked. THINGS TO TRY: To have a simple chore done, tell child in advance. Be sure they heard the directions. Remind the child before he or she forgets and does something else.
8 years	Vigorous, dramatic, curious, impatient, demanding. Not as moody as 7, but still sensitive. Very demanding of parents, especially mother; strongly influenced by her wishes and desires; wants time, attention, affection and approval; beginning to think abstractly; interested in and concerned about own possessions. Easily disappointed if people don't behave as wished. Can be quite critical of others and self. Argumentative.	Easily disappointed if what an adult says or does isn't what the child wants. THINGS TO TRY: Give commands in ways acceptable to the child. Money is a good motivator, as are time, attention and approval.
9 years	Quieter than at 8. Seems to be independent, responsible, dependable, cooperative. May sometimes be temperamental, but is basically reasonable. May be age of considerable rebellion against authority; tend to go to extremes; will take criticism fairly well if carefully phrased; great interest in fairness; group standards may be more important than parental standards. Demanding of others, but likely to be as critical of self as of others. Very involved with self and may not hear when spoken to. May appear absent-minded or indifferent. Shows anger at parents, but is also proud of them, is loyal to family, friends. May show concern for others.	Interests are beginning to spread beyond home and family. May resist feelings of being a little child and of being told what to do. THINGS TO TRY: Save direct commands for big important matters.
10 years	Emotionally direct, simple, clear-cut, usually well-balanced, yet still childlike. Less anxious and demanding than at 9. Most often good-natured and pleased with life. But may show sharp, violent temper. Can be very affectionate. Not a worrying age, yet a few earlier fears remain. Enjoys own humor, which may not be very funny to others. Happy age.	Tricks or specific and special ways of approaching a child are no longer particularly useful; involve the child's ability to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, truth from untruth; best technique is to know what is reasonable to expect.