

THE DISCIPLINE DIFFERENCE

Guidance that grows along with your child

By Holly Bennett

Kids change. It only stands to reason that our discipline methods should change along with them. Yet it's hard to keep up sometimes -- so we thought we'd give you a head start. Here's a stage-by-stage look at kids' most common behaviour challenges, and the strategies most likely to fit their level of maturity.

BIRTH TO ONE: FOUNDATION BUILDING

Where they're at:

The difference between a helpless newborn and a busy 11-month-old is so dramatic that it's hard to see the similarities. Yet even an older baby is a relatively brand-new and dependent being, with a very limited understanding of the world. Babies are not able to understand right and wrong and they do not deliberately "misbehave." What's more, says Wilma van den Hurk, professor of the Early Childhood Education program at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ont., "There no such thing as a spoiling a baby. You cannot give them too much love or positive attention."

So why are we even talking about discipline? Two reasons. First, we do still need to set limits with our babies: for example, even if they fuss we insist on buckling them into their car seats. That's a first experience of discipline. Second, the love and trust that grows between you and your baby now, and the understanding you gain of his unique personality and needs, is the foundation that will underpin effective positive discipline in the future.

Typical behaviour issues:

- **Crying**

Crying is not misbehaviour -- not ever, really, but especially not now when it's one of baby's only means of communicating distress. But it can still be very hard to cope with. "Infants cry more than most people expect," says van den Hurk, and though it's not always easy to figure out why they are crying, there is a long-term payoff to our efforts. Van den Hurk cites research demonstrating that "babies who are cared for attentively and comforted freely cry less than other babies later on."

- **"Into Everything"**

Starting when a baby becomes mobile, and extending right through the toddler years, exploration of anything and everything is a baby's *modus operandi*. "Babies and toddlers are sensorimotor learners," says van den Hurk. "That means they learn by touching, tasting, moving." Put something within reach of a baby -- whether it's a bowl of mashed bananas or a case of CDs -- and it will soon be all over the place. Again, this is not misbehaviour -- it is just how babies are wired.

Best bet discipline strategies:

Manage the environment. This will be key right through the toddler years, says van den Hurk. Babyproofing is one aspect of managing the environment, but so is anticipating a baby's need for food, sleep, less or more stimulation. Seven-month-old Gabriel is so busy these days, says his mother Stephanie Bartsch, "that he'll go too long during the day without wanting to stop to eat or sleep, so I make a point of removing him from all the distractions to help him focus on these things."

Distraction. "Babies have short attention spans," says van den Hurk. "You often can distract them away from an activity or object that's not allowed."

Supervision/prevention. "Gabe has his first teeth and whereas he used to be able to gum peoples' hands to his heart's content, now it hurts!" says Bartsch. "So I just remove my hand before he clamps down -- and he is definitely trying to do it less."

Realistic expectations. Bartsch knows that at seven months, Gabe can't understand that he is hurting people when he bites or pulls hair. "But at least he knows that I won't let him do it. I think that's the first little step."

Be gentle. "Babies are fragile," says van den Hurk. "Handle them gently, and speak to them kindly."

YOUR CHALLENGE: Learn to understand and meet your baby's needs without totally burning out.

"There is sometimes a conflict between what the baby needs and what the parents need," acknowledges van den Hurk. And while, in general, a baby's needs come first, babies also need parents who can function effectively. So there are times when, for example, you just can't carry the baby as much as she would like because your back hurts and needs to be rested. These little frustrations

naturally begin to teach a baby that, to paraphrase the song, “You can’t always get what you want.... But you get what you need.”

ONE AND TWO: LITTLE WHIRLWINDS

Where They're At:

"Toddlers look, and sometimes sound, like little people but they are still a lot like babies," says early childhood education professor Wilma van den Hurk.

Able to see the world only from their own perspective, prey to uncontrolled emotions and impulses, curious about everything, driven to assert their will and lacking a sense of danger or a firm understanding of cause and effect, toddlers are high-maintenance creatures.

When it comes to discipline, it's important to realize that even verbal toddlers cannot understand or follow rules the way an older child can, says van den Hurk. "They have short attention spans and a short memory, and they aren't capable of complex reasoning."

Expect your toddler to be a mass of contradictions. "They want to be independent and do everything themselves," says van den Hurk, "but when they are tired or hungry or stressed or frightened, they will regress." Your toddler may start the day the brave explorer, and end it wanting to be carried, cuddled and fed like a baby. It's all in a day's work when you're two!

Typical Behaviour Issues:

How to choose? There are so many! Let's just say it's lucky they're so cute...

• Tantrums

Ah, the dreaded tantrum. Toddler tantrums are little emotional volcanoes: the result of too much frustration, anger or stress for a small person to contain. Smart parents figure out what tends to trigger their child's melt-downs and try to prevent them, but you won't be able to avoid them all, especially if your child is temperamentally intense. Remember that although tantrums may be triggered by a discipline issue (for example, frustration at not being allowed to take a playmate's toy), they are not a discipline issue in and of themselves. Your child is just really upset and has lost control. The good news? Toddler tantrums usually blow over as quickly as they blow up.

• Contrariness

It's no coincidence that this word appears in the preteen section as well. Both age groups are teetering on the edge of a great leap forward, and it makes them a little, well, ornery. Toddlers are famous for falling in love with the word "NO" -- and for deciding that if you want it, they don't.

Best Bet Discipline Strategies:

Here's a way of thinking about toddler discipline. At this age, kids are too young to really understand rules or to control themselves consistently. But the limits that we enforce *for* them now, are setting the stage for limits they will actually understand later. (You don't want your three-year-old to head into nursery school thinking it is perfectly OK to grab toys or shove other kids!)

Every strategy on the baby list is still essential. Childproofing, supervision, prevention, distraction -- this is the stuff of everyday life with a toddler. But van den Hurk suggests you can also add:

- **Consistent, predictable routines and rituals.** "Routines helps a toddler feel safe and in control," says van den Hurk. It makes him feel like a big, competent person to know what to do. And he's more likely to cooperate with something familiar than something new.
- **Use do's rather than don'ts.** This is not just a ploy to make your toddler feel more cooperative. Toddlers actually have a hard time figuring out negative instructions, explains van den Hurk: "They can't reverse the negative to flip to the desired behaviour." So rather than "Don't run!" try "Walk slowly near the pool."
- **Model, model, model.** Toddlers are natural-born mimics -- copying us is how they learn what to do. So don't yell at her to be more quiet!
- **What about time out?** Van den Hurk is not keen on time out for toddlers. "If you're talking about a quiet place to be together and calm down, then yes," she says. But she doesn't think isolating toddlers is helpful. "They are not really equipped to calm themselves down," she explains. "They do need our help."

YOUR CHALLENGE: Recognize that these behaviours are normal.

Nearly all of the toddler behaviour that makes parents crazy is "developmentally driven" -- that means normal, healthy and expected. "So rather than 'discipline' normal behaviour," says van den Hurk, "it's a matter of finding ways to deal with it, to keep everyone and everything safe, until they grow out of it."

THREE TO FIVE: EAGER TO PLEASE

Where They're At:

Preschoolers are busy acquiring all the skills they yearned for as toddlers: talking, jumping, drawing, building, pedalling, pretending. There's a new sense of competence and focus to their activity. Above all, says parent educator Kathy Lynn, "They are starting to really play with other kids. They don't quite know how to handle relationships, but they want to make friends and play together."

Like toddlers, preschoolers sometimes backtrack in their progress. "Regression is common, especially with something like toilet training," says Lynn. "When kids get busy or tired or stressed, they may need a little rest from being so grown up."

Typical Behaviour Issues:

• Whining

"Whining peaks at three and a half," says Lynn. Though it takes more self-control than crying, adults may not see it as an improvement: "Whining grates." While some children are more prone to whininess than others, Lynn says we play our part. "It's an experiment with language. If it gets attention, it will continue."

• Stormy Fours

While three and five tend to be relatively cooperative ages, four tends to take parents by surprise. "Four-year-olds can have very stormy tempers," says Lynn. Defiance, yelling, and saucy backtalk are all par for the course. If you are ever going to be called a "poo-poo head," it will probably be by a four-year-old.

Best bet discipline strategies:

A few good rules. "A few clear rules that they know and understand are helpful," says Lynn. "Millions of unimportant little rules are crazy-making." Like toddlers, preschoolers are creatures of habit, so back up your rules with consistent routines.

Offer choices. Preschoolers are more cooperative when they have at least a little say in their own lives. Simple, safe choices are also a perfect way to start teaching children about the consequences of their own decisions. "Offer easy choices from equally acceptable options," says Lynn. "They don't get a choice about bedtime, but they get to choose their stories and whether to have bubbles or food colouring in their bath."

Distinguish between true misbehaviour and inability to cope. When a child is hurting another kid or deliberately breaking things, she needs to hear that this behaviour is not OK. Depending on the situation, you may underline your words with an action consequence, like taking away a toy that was thrown.

But that's different, says Lynn, from a child whose behaviour is deteriorating because of stress. "The melt-down at a birthday party is classic. It's caused by overload, and what the child needs is to be rescued from all that noise and pressure." When four-year-old Riley had an afternoon tantrum over nothing, his mom remembered he had hardly touched his lunch. Instead of doling out discipline, she put out a plate of crackers and cheese; five minutes later, the food was gone and Riley was his old pleasant self.

Respect their feelings; limit behaviour. This could be a mantra for all the years to come. Kids need to know that we respect their feelings even when we can't indulge them: "I know you really wanted to watch that TV show. It's OK to tell me how mad you are. But it's not OK to throw things."

Now what about time out? "Time out is not a place, it's a state of mind," suggests Lynn. Parents tend to get over-focused on a certain chair, or a certain number of minutes. It's not about the chair! Time-out, says Lynn, is simply a break from a situation that is triggering misbehaviour or a break from a conflict. Whether you take that break together, or you need a break from each other, it can be a useful strategy. Just keep focused on the purpose -- helping everyone pull themselves together and start fresh.

YOUR CHALLENGE: Don't take it personally.

You do need to address even "developmentally appropriate" misbehaviour, says Lynn. But keep your perspective, and don't overreact. A four-year-old calling you names or swearing at you ~~is not the moral equivalent to your spouse or sister doing it:~~ he doesn't understand the subtleties of personal insults. He's just trying to let you know he's really mad.

SIX TO EIGHT: THE GOLDEN YEARS

Where They're At:

Though these are often seen as the “easy” years, kids at this stage have their own challenges to face. The transition to grade one can be quite taxing for some kids, leading to tears, tantrums or conflict with siblings when they get home.

Other aspects of this age are harder on parents, says Vancouver parent educator Kathy Lynn. “School-age kids are engaging in more activities out of the sight of parents and caregivers, and parents wrestle with how much they should know about what their kids are doing.” Demands on kids from outside the home are also ramping up: homework, music practice, sports teams, and parents are expected to support these expectations without interfering -- another tricky balancing act.

On the plus side, many kids this age seem to breeze through life. They are energetic and enthusiastic; they play well with their friends; they are affectionate and (fairly) cooperative with their parents.

Typical Behaviour Issues:

Backtalk

“Awww, give me a BREAK!”-- complete with eye-roll. It might be funny in a four-year-old, but it's not so cute by grade 2. School-age kids can be rather mouthy in expressing their objections.

Backtalk or “attitude” is part of the bigger issue of learning to “fight fair.” So we shouldn't let blatant disrespect go unchallenged, but it's important to recognize that kids do need to express their opinions and negative feelings. We expect kids to follow our rules; it's not fair to also expect them to pretend to like them! So stay focused on the need to pick up the Lego rather than being sidetracked by your son's tone of voice.

Electronimania

Most preschoolers today have dabbled in electronic games. Now, though, the floodgates open, and with them the need for parental limits. Between video and computer games, your DVD collection, TV and instant messaging, kids can spend hours each day in front of a screen. Moreover, beginners often don't know how to pace themselves: a seven-year-old can play a game until he is weeping with frustration, exhausted from the intensity, and half-crazed from the inactivity -- and not know enough to stop!

Best Bet Discipline Strategies

Give them real input. This is a step up from the simple choices we give preschoolers, says Lynn. Want your daughter to do a chore? Give her some say in the matter: I need you to do one of these two jobs. Which one would you like?

Help them understand. No lectures, please -- but school age kids are ready to understand why we make certain decisions, says Lynn. "You can explain more." It helps them realize that we don't thwart them just to be "mean," and allows you to discuss your underlying values: "It's important to be kind to other people, even when we don't really feel like it."

You can have it when. What do you do when a task is at hand and your child is not? Take the opportunity to demonstrate that responsibilities come before treats. Is his favourite TV show coming up? "You can watch it when you've cleared the table."

Logical consequences. When kids misbehave, a consequence that relates to the issue at hand helps them make the connection between poor choices and their outcome. So if your child steals his brother's candy and you take away his TV time, that's just an arbitrary punishment. Have him use his allowance to replace the candy, with interest -- that makes sense. "The point is not to make kids suffer," says Lynn, "but to help them understand their responsibility."

YOUR CHALLENGE: Learn to follow through.

"Take threats out of your vocabulary," says Lynn. "Kids ignore them." But if you have stated a reasonable consequence for a certain behaviour, then mean what you say and do it. Yes, it's hard! Our children's apologies, tears and promises are very persuasive. But if we don't follow through, "Kids learn really quickly that they can do whatever they want as long as they apologize."

9 TO 11: BIG KID DISCIPLINE

Where They're At:

Even if you're aren't seeing any obvious signs of puberty, your child is changing. Hormones may be making her feel moody or oversensitive, but changes in her cognitive abilities are just as important.

"Around puberty, kids develop the ability to think abstractly and handle ideas more," says Ottawa parent educator Betsy Mann. That means they are able to stand back and question things -- including our rules -- in a new way.

And they are eager to increase their independence, says Mann. "They're asking to go to the park alone with friends. They want to have some money of their own, and more control over how they spend their time."

Like toddlers, preteens often show an uneven pattern of development, says Mann: "One day they're pulling out their Tonka trucks and the next day they want the latest rap CD. The swing between being a young child and becoming a young adult can be very confusing and make it difficult for parents to know who they are disciplining."

Typical Behaviour Issues:

• Contrariness

Challenging rules is a positive developmental step, but preteens can easily carry things too far, disputing or resisting anything that rubs them the wrong way. "We have now reached the point where questioning our authority is almost a daily thing," says Laura Landry, mom to two preteens.

"They can become very argumentative," Mann says. "Some become very persistent. This can get exhausting and wear you down."

• Hypersensitivity

The preteen can be a tender soul, especially vulnerable to put-downs, teasing or humiliation. Kids learn to dish it out before they learn to take it, so you may have a child on your hands who loves to lay on a sarcastic insult, but flies off the handle or dissolves in tears when she gets it back in spades.

Best Bet Discipline Strategies:

Engage their new abilities. “This is a time to start teaching self-discipline,” says Mann. “Teach your child how to think, problem-solve, anticipate consequences.” If your child wants to say home alone, and you’re not sure he’s ready, walk him through your concerns. “What would you do if the doorbell rang? If there was a fire? If you wanted to make a snack? Then listen to what your child says. The listening is really important, because children want respect.”

Encourage responsibility. Kids this age can take charge of more aspects of their lives. Instead of reminding him 100 times to put his lunch in his lunchbag, suggests Mann, “help him figure out how to remember it on his own. Suggest a morning checklist or a reminder sign by the door.” When Landry’s son kept putting off a task for his Cub troupe despite her reminders, she figured it was time for him to learn the consequences of procrastination. “So he didn’t get his 100 points, and he has to start all over again.”

Negotiate -- when appropriate. As kids approach adolescence, we need to acknowledge their growing maturity by being more flexible about the minor issues. Jackie Gauthier and her husband try to be clear with their ten-year-old daughter about what is negotiable (bedtimes on weekends, when her chores get done) and what is not (bedtimes on school nights, going out without permission). Although it can be tiresome, remember that negotiating towards a mutually satisfactory solution is an extremely valuable life skill that will stand your child in good stead.

Stand firm. At the same time, you need to take a strong stand on the really important rules. “Kids know that some of what they’re asking for is unrealistic or unsafe.,” says Mann. In a way, it’s the knowledge that parents will provide the safety net of firm bottom-line boundaries that gives kids the confidence to push towards independence.

YOUR CHALLENGE: Find ways to stay connected to your child, even while supporting his growing independence.

Preteens still enjoy spending time with their parents as long as it’s doing something they like, and it’s worth taking full advantage of this willingness. “All real discipline is based on a connection,” says Mann. “You don’t care what your parents think if you are not connected to them.”

FROM 12 to 14: ANTICIPATING ADULthood

Where They're At:

C'mon, you're thinking, my 12-year-old is nowhere near adulthood! Nevertheless, it's time to start looking ahead, says Peter Marshall, a psychologist and author of *Now I Know Why Tigers Eat Their Young: Surviving a New Generation of Teenagers* (Whitecap, 2000). Over the next few years, kids will push -- sometimes hard -- for increasing autonomy and independence, and this is a good and necessary thing. In only six short years, your 12-year-old needs to be ready to manage on his own!

Meanwhile, hormones are kicking in big-time, usually sooner for girls, but Marshall says we exaggerate the emotional swings of adolescents: "They are just more lively than us sluggish adults." Friends take on great importance, supporting each other through each leaving-the-nest step. And kids are working to define themselves, their passions and goals and style. ~~Philip Baker's 13-year-old son, Justin, has grown his hair long and wears his favourite hat constantly. "He's finding his own look," says his dad.~~

Typical Behaviour Issues:

Irritability/Attitude: "Just leave me alone!" Teens can get snappy when they feel invaded, pressured or nagged, even when our request is completely reasonable. A lot of that attitude, says Marshall, comes from the need teens have for more space. "There's nothing wrong with a 14-year-old girl closing the door of her bedroom and staring at the ceiling for a couple of hours," he says. That's not to say we should back out of our young teens' lives. But we do need to respect their need for more "private time."

"Forgetting" Rules and Chores: Feeling so much more grown-up, kids may feel that family rules no longer apply. "We've always expected the kids to let us know where they are," says Phil Baker. "A few times lately our 13-year-old, Justin has neglected to call or lost track of time and come home late." It helped to explain to Justin that this rule applies equally to the adults: "In a busy family we need to know who will be here for dinner or where to call if something comes up," says Baker.

Jumping the Gun: Plenty of 13-year-olds are still pretty innocent. But others are pushing: to date or have sex, to get tatoos or push-up bras, to go to a rock concert with "this guy I know who has a car." Yikes!

Best Bet Discipline Strategies:

Create a climate of negotiation, not struggle. As a parent, you will still have to say no, sometimes firmly and unequivocally (like maybe to that guy with the car). But, says Marshall, “in most cases you should discuss major issues. Invite your child’s input and really consider what she has to say, without saying “yes, but” after her first sentence. Take time to think on it. Then if you disagree and are going to set the boundary tighter than she wants, give your reasons why.” Usually, he adds, you should be able to add on the words “Not yet.”

The idea is for kids to know their concerns will get a fair hearing, and for them to see that even though they don’t get their way every time, they are making progress toward more freedom.

Involve your child in setting consequences. When kids have actually proposed the consequence to, say, staying out without phoning, says Marshall, they are more likely to accept it. Consequences should usually be short-lived and imposed without an accompanying lecture, he adds.

Help him think things through. Give your child practice in planning and decision-making, so he’ll develop this skill. “Here’s what we need to know to let you go on this trip: 1) what time does the bus leave and return, 2) what does it cost, 3) will Amy’s parents meet you at the bus station...” and so on. When Justin wanted to play rep hockey this year, his parents were inclined to say no -- he was already very busy, and the schedule was gruelling. “But he made a strong case for participating by planning out how he was going to fit in the rest of his life,” says Baker.

Put him in charge. Some of the things we hassle with our kids about don’t need to be our problem. For example, “Most kids this age can be in charge of their own school work,” suggests Marshall. If he screws up, you have just grounds for taking back some control. Otherwise, his homework can be his business.

YOUR CHALLENGE: Gradually let go of control, without letting go of parenting. “The older teens get, the higher the stakes are in terms of the potential consequences of a wrong decision,” says Marshall. Yet we cannot choose for them. Think of it this way, he suggests: “You are not abdicating responsibility -- you are *teaching* responsibility.”