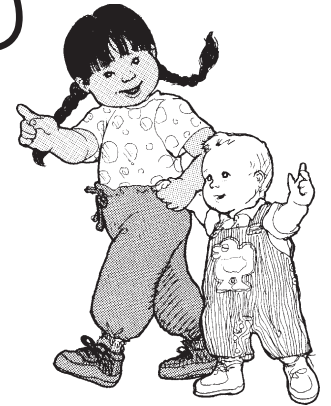




Understanding Children

Disciplining your preschooler



Preschoolers are delightful to have around, but at times can be quite a challenge! Learning how to get along with others and follow rules takes lots of practice for preschoolers; learning how to guide and discipline preschoolers takes lots of patience for parents.

■ Understanding preschool children

Preschool children are busy learning about the world around them. They ask lots of questions and they love to imitate adults. They are learning to share and take turns (but don't always want to). Sometimes they want to play with others and sometimes they want to be alone.

Preschoolers also are quite independent. They like to try new things and often take risks. They may try to shock you at times by using "forbidden words." Getting attention is fun, being ignored is not.

Preschoolers like to make decisions for themselves because it makes them feel important. They also are likely to get carried away and become rather bossy.

Preschoolers have lots of energy—sometimes more energy than adults! They play hard, fast, and furious; then they tire suddenly and get cranky and irritable.

Preschoolers spend a lot of time learning how to get along with others. "Best friends" are very important, but such friendships are brief and may last only a few minutes. Hurt feelings (and sometimes swift kicks) are part of the learning process too.

■ Ideas for parents

There is no one right way to discipline. An approach that is successful in one situation may not work in another. Also, different children respond in different ways to disciplining methods. Successful parents often use a

variety of approaches to deal with behavioral problems.

Set up a safe environment

One of the most important things a parent can do is to establish a safe environment.



Preschoolers move quickly and love to climb and explore. Take a close look at your home including the exterior, garage, and yard. You may be able to avoid some accidents. Fix, repair, toss, or lock up anything that might be a danger to your child.

It also is important to be on the look out for dangerous situations while running errands or visiting others with your children. Having a safe place to play and appropriate toys to play with can save you from saying “NO,” making your job as a parent much easier.

Establish a routine

Preschoolers need a consistent routine and reasonable bedtimes. Their small stomachs and high energy levels frequently need nutritious snacks and meals. Establishing consistent times for eating, napping, and playing helps children learn how to pace themselves. Balance the day with active times, quiet times, times to be alone, and times to be with others. Take care of basic needs to help prevent frustrating situations with a cranky and whiny child.

Set a good example

Preschoolers love to imitate adults. Watch your bad habits because your youngster will be sure to copy them! If you want your child to use good manners or pick up his or her room, be sure to demonstrate how to do it. Preschoolers are very interested in “why” we do things; it helps to explain what you are doing in very simple terms.

Time out

Many parents like to use a technique called “time out.” A time out is just that—a time out or cooling off period. When a child is misbehaving or out of control, he or she needs to be removed or isolated for a few minutes. Time out can be used with children ages 3 to 12 and with as many children as you have private places. For young children, however, the time out period needs to be no longer than 5 minutes or they tend to forget the reason for the time out.

A time out gives a child a few minutes to settle down and think about what has happened. Parents need to follow-up by talking with the child about the misbehavior.

Young children do not always understand their misdoings. It helps to explain what happened, what they should not be doing, and what they can do instead. They also need the opportunity to practice the correct behavior. Keep such discussions simple. You might say, “It’s not OK to hit your sister. Instead, tell her with words that you want to play with the blocks, too.”

Active listening

Child: John won’t let me ride in the wagon.

Father: Sounds like you are upset about that.

Child: Yeah, he’s mean!

Father: Hmm. You sound really angry!

Child: Yeah! I had the wagon first.

Father: You were playing with the wagon before John was?

Child: Yeah, then he took it away.

Father: Hmm. Wonder why?

Child: I dunno. Maybe because I wouldn’t let him play.

Father: Wonder how both of you could play with the wagon?

Child: Maybe he could ride and I could pull!

This is an example of active listening in which the father is trying to understand the problem as well as the child’s feelings. The father does not try to end the conversation; instead, he encourages it. With the father’s time and support, the child is able to explore the situation, understand the problem, and even offer a solution.

Sometimes preschoolers do not need an adult to intervene.

Rather, they need someone who will listen and help them work through a problem.

Young children still have very limited problem-solving skills. The child in the above example was 5 years old. With a 3-year-old in the same situation, the father may have needed to be more direct or offer a suggestion. For example:

Father: Maybe you could both sit in the wagon, or maybe one of you can pull and the other one can sit. Which idea do you like best?

Natural or logical consequences

Natural or logical consequences help children understand the connection between their actions and the results of their misbehavior.

Natural consequences are results that would naturally happen after a child’s behavior if the parent did not do anything.

The following examples show how natural consequences work.

- Four-year-old Cara was tossing a quarter around in the car. Her mother asked her to put the quarter in her pocket. Cara continued to toss her money and the quarter flew out the window. She lost her quarter.
- Five-year-old Juan kept forgetting to put the ball in his toy box when he came inside from playing. One afternoon the ball disappeared. Juan lost his ball.

Logical consequences should be used whenever natural consequences are dangerous or unpractical. For example, it would be dangerous for a child to experience the natural consequence of running into the street and getting hit by a car!

Logical consequences happen when a parent helps the child correct the behavior. A logical consequence of a child running into the street could be losing the privilege of playing outside. Dad might comment, "Looks like you will need to play inside. When you can stay out of the street, then you can play outdoors."

The following examples also illustrate the use of logical consequences.

- Four-year-old Alex said "Yuck!" and hurled his muffin across the kitchen. Dad calmly picked up the muffin and put it in the trash. Dad commented, "When you keep your food on your plate, then you can eat." Alex went without a snack.

Watch your language

Use your words carefully to teach children. Focus on what to do rather than what not to do.

Try saying:

- Slow down and walk.
- Come hold my hand.
- Keep your feet on the floor.
- Use your quiet voice inside.

Instead of:

- Stop running.
- Don't touch anything.
- Don't climb on the couch.
- Stop screaming and shouting.

- Five-year-old Dena and four-year-old Peter are fighting. Mom says, "Looks like you two are having trouble getting along. Find something that you can play with together or you'll have to play alone in separate rooms."

Redirection

Often, the problem is not what the child is doing, but the way he or she is doing it. In that case, redirecting or teaching the child a different way to do the same thing can be effective. If the child is drawing on books, remove the books and say, "Books are not for drawing on." Offer a substitute at the same time and say, "If you want to draw on something, draw on this paper." If your child is throwing blocks, you can remove the blocks and offer a ball to throw. If the child wants to dance on the coffee table, help him or her down and ask your child to perform for you on the front porch.

Ignoring the behavior

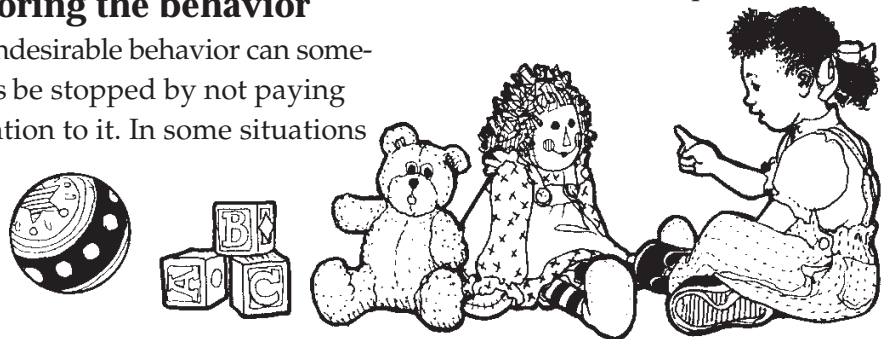
Undesirable behavior can sometimes be stopped by not paying attention to it. In some situations

this can work effectively. Withhold all attention, praise, and support. Eventually, the child quits the unacceptable behavior because it does not bring the desired attention. This works particularly well when a child uses forbidden or swear words to get attention.

When all else fails

Sometimes children have a behavioral problem that seems to happen over and over. When nothing seems to be working, try the who, what, when, where, and how method. Ask yourself, "When does the troublesome behavior seem to happen? What happens just before and after? Where does it happen and with whom? How do I usually respond? How could I prevent the behavior? What other approaches could I use?"

The best method to find a more successful way to cope with behavioral problems is to take the time to think about options.



■ Does spanking work?

Preschoolers often respond well to physical action when you need to discipline them. Touching them on the arm, taking them by the hand, picking them up, holding, or restraining them are all good ways to get their attention.

Spanking also will get their attention, but doesn't do a very good job of teaching children how to behave. In fact, it generally distresses a child so much that he or she can't pay attention to your explanations and directions. It's hard to reason with a screaming, crying child.

Spanking and slapping can quickly get out-of-hand for both parents and children. Most reported cases of abuse involve loving, well-meaning parents who lost control. Studies show that children who experience or witness a great deal of spanking, slapping, or hitting are much more likely to become aggressive themselves. Children who are bullied by older brothers, sisters, or other children often react by bullying others. Children who are spanked frequently often hit younger children.

Preschoolers love to imitate. Most parents find it more successful to focus on teaching a child *what to do* rather than *what not to do*. It may help to think of behavior problems as opportunities to teach your child new skills. After all, the word discipline comes from the word disciple, which means to teach.

■ Taking care of yourself

Parenting preschoolers is challenging and works better when you remember to take care of yourself. Remember to rest, eat well, and relax. Above all else, try to maintain a sense of humor. When you discover your child dumping flour on the floor or finger painting with the sour cream, remember that someday this will be a great story to tell your grandchildren. Grab a camera and take a picture! You will want to remember this. Honest.

■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families contact your county extension office and ask for the following.

Understanding Children: Temper tantrums, PM 1529j

Understanding Children: Toilet training, PM 1529k

Understanding Children: Biting, PM 1529a

Ages & Stages, 1530e-g

Also visit the ISU Extension Store at:
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