



TIPS FOR PARENTS

How to Effectively Use Positive Discipline Strategies

The words *positive* and *discipline* may not seem like they should go together. But disciplining children can be a positive experience when parents are equipped with different strategies to use for different situations. Discipline does not necessarily have to be a negative experience—*discipline* actually means *guidance*, not punishment. Children need to learn “the rules” of how to act, how to treat others, how to share, and how to say “please” and “thank you” from adults through positive discipline interactions.

Disciplining becomes easier when parents keep in mind that there is a reason for all behaviors. Children’s actions are driven by their needs. Children do not always know how to express their needs or act upon them in an appropriate manner that

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is not disruptive or harmful. A child might be hungry, tired, or in need of attention, and that is why they are “acting out” or not following instructions. That is where positive discipline is helpful! Adults can discipline children in a way that

guides and teaches them appropriate ways of interacting with others, expressing their needs, acting on their needs, and behaving in different situations.

Additionally, just as one size rarely “fits all,” not every discipline technique works with every child or in every situation. One child may cry when their parent gives them a stern look. Another may ignore a parent’s stern look and keep doing the unwanted behavior. Yet another may respond to a parent’s look by immediately stopping what they are doing and chang-



ing their behavior. All children are different. Some children are more sensitive than others. Some have a harder time focusing their attention or remembering what they are told than others. You’ll get the best results by matching the discipline approach with the child’s characteristics or temperament and developmental age.

Likewise, not every discipline technique is fit for every situation. For example, you may tell your 4-year-old to sit down to eat their ice cream cone, so they won’t drop it. If the child does not follow instructions and the ice cream falls to the ground (*natural consequence*), then you can say, “That is why mommy told you to sit in the chair. I am sorry we have to throw the ice cream in the trash. Next time you need to listen to mommy.” But parents would not want to use that same strategy if their 4-year-old kept opening the fence gate and running toward the road—the natural consequences of running into the road are far too dangerous for that discipline response. Having many disciplining tools equips parents to select the one that best fits the child, the situation, and the behavior.



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Positive disciplining can happen when parents have many tools to choose from, when the child's needs and motivations are considered, and when parents guide their child toward more appropriate behavior. Here, we explain 10 positive disciplining tools, along with examples for when and how to use them.



Distraction

Distraction is a valuable tool. When you want to avoid certain behaviors, you can try distracting your child to help them focus on something else that will not upset them. Distraction can be a good tool and is easy to do, especially with young children, because their brains do not yet have all the connections to allow them to focus on one thing for a long period of time. **Do not use distraction if your child is extremely upset or hurt, or has hurt someone else.**

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You and your 2-year-old are at the park. You notice that your child wants a ball that another child has. To keep your child from becoming upset, you might say, “Let’s go play on the slides.” Changing where you are on the playground and what your child is doing will help avoid certain behaviors. • If you are making lunch and you notice your 3-year-old getting cranky, you can use distraction. Sing a song with them or make up a simple handshake. This fun activity will help distract your child until they are able to eat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your 7-year-old is upset because their friend could not come over to the house. You can distract them with an activity; you could suggest they play outside, draw a picture, or play with their toys. • While your 10-year-old is doing homework, you notice they are starting to get frustrated. You could allow them a short break with a distraction to keep them from becoming even more upset. You could play a song they enjoy and let them dance while they listen.



Ignore some behaviors

Attention is rewarding for a child, whether it is positive attention, like telling them “great job,” or negative attention, like scolding them for misbehaving. When your child gets your attention, they want to keep your attention. Actively ignoring some behaviors, like whining and tantrums, can help reduce how often your child behaves in these ways. They will learn that such behavior will not get them what they want. When you actively ignore, you purposefully look the other way and do not give attention to that behavior. When you choose to ignore a behavior, make sure you ignore it every time. If you start to pay attention to that behavior again, your child will know acting that way will get your attention, and they will continue doing it. **Do not ignore behaviors that could cause harm to your child.**

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You open the freezer and your 2-year-old sees the popsicles you bought for dessert that night. Your child asks for one now, and you say, “Not now, baby. They are for after we eat our dinner.” However, your child cries and starts screaming. Instead of giving them a popsicle to stop the screaming, try facing the other direction and act like you do not hear them. As soon as they quiet down, give them attention again. This will help them realize they get attention when they are not screaming. • It is time to get ready for bed, but your 3-year-old refuses to come brush their teeth. When you go to get them, they fall to the ground and cry. Try to look away and act as though you are not bothered. Right when they stop crying, pay attention to them again and say something like, “I like how you were able to calm yourself down. How about you pick out the book you want to read for story time before we go brush your teeth.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your 8-year-old child is watching television. You tell them to turn it off and come eat dinner, but they refuse to listen, so you tell them, “If you do not turn the television off, I will come turn it off myself.” They do not listen, so you turn off the TV; they start crying and whining to continue watching TV. Try to actively ignore this behavior. Walk back to where you are going to eat your meal and continue preparing as though they are not crying. Right when they stop crying, immediately give them attention again, saying, “Thank you for quieting down. Please come eat with us.” • Your child complains that they are bored. Even after you give them suggestions of things they could do, they begin to make noises as loudly as they can right in front of you. Try not to pay attention; look away and pretend like you do not hear it. They will eventually stop when they realize their behavior is not getting the attention they wanted. After they stop, pay attention to them again.



Soothe

When a child gets overwhelmed with emotions like frustration, it becomes more difficult for them to control their behavior. Soothing is easier when you help your child before they get too overwhelmed with the emotion. Pay attention to the signs that a meltdown may be coming. Signs such as a red face, clenched fists or teeth, or fast, heavy breathing are common before a meltdown. When you see these signs, you may need to step in and soothe your younger child or help your older child self-soothe so they can calm down, think, and make better decisions. This is a great practice for adults, as well! When we get overwhelmed, it becomes more difficult to use positive discipline, so be sure to allow yourself time to soothe, calm down, take a break, and then return to the parenting situation, able to respond more appropriately. Remember that children are looking to you to learn how to calm themselves. Healthy soothing techniques can include controlled breathing, singing, dancing, walking, hugging, talking, rocking, or even taking a warm bath. Be sure to use the soothing technique that the child responds best to; one child may not like to be touched very much and will respond better to singing and dancing around.

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your toddler has had a long, fun day of too much excitement at their birthday party. They missed their nap, and now they are close to a meltdown because they do not know how else to handle being overwhelmed and tired. You pick them up, hug them, and sit in a rocking chair while rubbing their back. Hugs, rocking, and physical touch lower stress hormones and release hormones that make us feel better. Soothed by your touch and the rocking, your toddler will probably calm down, stop crying, and fall asleep for a much-needed nap. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your preteen comes home in a bad mood, upset about something another girl at school said about them. When your child's little sibling asks them to play, they rudely say no and start picking on the younger sibling. You know they did this because they are in a bad mood from what happened at school. After helping them recognize that, you can take your children for a walk or have a little dance party. Exercise, sunlight and fresh air, music, singing, dancing, and moving your body in general can calm you down and improve your mood. Soothed and in a better mood, your preteen will likely agree to play with their younger sibling.



Choices

Giving your child choices does not mean that they are in control. Giving them choices that you provide will help you avoid having a power struggle. It will also empower your children and help you work together toward a common goal. When children have choices, they feel like they have a little control over the situation, which helps them feel safe and develop confidence in their ability to make decisions. When giving your child choices, stick to just two options for younger children, and two or three options for older children. It is also important that, when you give choices, you let them have the choice they picked. ***That means you need to be sure you are OK with the options you provide. Remember that you are the one deciding what options your child has, so make them ones that you are comfortable with allowing.***

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You and your 3-year-old are leaving the house for work and school. You notice your child is not motivated to put their shoes and jacket on, and you are in a hurry. You say with an excited tone, "Do you want to put on your jacket or shoes first?" as you help them get dressed. You notice your 2-year-old has not been interested in eating their vegetables. You take your child to the grocery store and ask your child, "Which vegetable should we have for dinner?" and talk about how excited you are to make dinner: "I can't wait to have the vegetables you picked out for dinner!" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your 6-year-old cries when you tell them to make the bed. You could say, "Would you like to make your bed before you eat breakfast or after you brush your teeth?" This way, they have choices, but the choices you gave still require them to do the chore. You take your preteen shopping for new school shoes and they find a jacket that they really like. You explain that you are on a budget and that they need the shoes, but already have a good jacket that fits. You give them a choice of buying a less expensive pair of shoes and the jacket, or buying the more expensive shoes they have been wanting, but not the jacket. This also teaches about budgets and opens the door for conversations about wants versus needs.



Involve Children in the Behavior Plan

An important aspect of discipline is teaching your children the rules of behavior—what is safe, what is fair, what is healthy. You can involve them in making the basic rules and consequences for breaking those rules. Letting them have a role in this helps them understand the connections between their behaviors and the consequences of their behaviors. It also allows them to feel important and more responsible for their actions. Studies show that, when children are involved in creating the rules, they tend to follow those rules.

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your preschooler throws the blocks he was playing with at another child, causing her to cry. Have a conversation with your child, talking them through what they did and how it made the other child feel. Ask them, “Since you threw the blocks at Suzie, should you be able to play with the blocks? Why?” Walk them through the answer and help them come to the conclusion that, since they did not play nicely with the blocks, they should not be allowed to play with the blocks until they can play with them nicely. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your children frequently argue over who gets to ride in the front seat, who gets to choose the music in the car, and who gets to pick the TV show you watch. Together, come up with a system everyone agrees on for fairly sharing these choices among the children. For example, one child gets to choose the TV show on odd days of the week and the other child on even days; or you could have them alternate by week. You could also have one child who gets to ride in the front of the car, one who gets to choose the music, and one who gets to pick the show. Having the children help come up with the rotation reduces arguments and helps them learn how to cooperate.



Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is used to reward a behavior and encourage the child to repeat that behavior. It can be as simple as a “thank you” or “great job,” or more tangible, like a new toy or getting to choose the game for game night. When you reward your child for a positive behavior, your child may be more eager to act that way again; therefore, you are encouraging them to act in positive ways. ***Never use food and sweets as positive reinforcement because this can lead to poor eating decisions and make unhealthy connections for children between sweets and feeling good. For example, children may eat these “rewards” even if they are not hungry, limiting their ability to listen to the signs of their bodies that tell them that they are hungry. It can also lead children to overeat foods high in sugar, fat, or empty calories, which is a habit we do not want to encourage.***

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You see your 2-year-old playing with their Lego blocks. After they have finished playing, they neatly put their toys in the bin where they belong. You smile and praise your child by saying, “I see you cleaned up your toys! Good job!” You and your 3-year-old are at the park and you are pushing your child on the swing. You notice another child come over and ask to swing; your 3-year-old hops off the swing and lets the other child have a turn. You smile and say to your child, “That’s very nice of you to share the swing and take turns!” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You notice that your 8-year-old cleaned their room without you having to ask, and even helped their younger sister clean her room, too. You are glad to see they did not need to be asked to help clean, so you might say, “Thank you! I really love how you cleaned your room without asking, and that you helped your sister. That is so considerate! Would you like to pick the movie we watch tonight?” Your child drew a picture for your neighbor who just got back from the hospital. After you go with them to drop it off, you might say, “That was so kind of you to draw her a picture. I’m proud of how thoughtful you are! I’m sure she loved it.”



Logical Consequences

Using logical consequences is important so that children can make a connection between their behavior and the punishment. Taking away TV time because a child threw a block at their friend does not help the child connect their behavior to the punishment. However, keeping that child from playing with blocks makes sense. The message to the child is, “If you do not play nicely with the blocks, you cannot play with the blocks.” When using logical consequences, it is important that the consequences match the behaviors.

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You notice your 3-year-old taking a toy from another child who was playing with it. After telling your child to play nicely and not to take from others, your child still insists on keeping the toy. You take the toy from your child and allow your child to sit with you and watch as you remind them how to play nicely. “If you do not want to play nicely, then you can sit and watch others play. We play nicely by asking for a turn and sharing, but not by taking toys.” • Your 4-year-old throws all of their stuffed animals around the room. You tell them, “Since you threw the toys on the floor, you need to pick them all up and put them away when you are done playing.” You may need to help younger children clean up, but it is important that you do not do it all because they need to learn how to clean up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You already told your 9-year-old that they could not go outside alone to skate, but you see them skating down the street. After getting them inside, you say, “I specifically told you not to skate outside by yourself. It could be dangerous, and I did not know where you were. Give me your skates; you are not allowed to use them the rest of the day.” • Your 10-year-old filled the kitchen sink with dirty dishes while you were at work. Rather than sending your child to his room as punishment, you could say, “You used these dishes, so you need to clean them up. Come wash all of these dishes and put them away.”



Increase Consistency

Consistency is key! Children must learn and understand the rules; they need to know what to expect and what is expected of them. Having consistent rules with consistent consequences for not following them helps children learn the rules better. It also helps them learn that, no matter what, they are not going to be able to get away with bad behavior. This means expectations and consequences need to be consistent from one parent to the next, and from one situation to the next. The same rules should apply when you are in public, at home, on the playground, or at a friend’s house. When parents are tired, they often will give in or allow a child to do things they normally would not. It is very important for parents to make sure that they stick to the rules even when they are tired or distracted. Otherwise, children, especially when they are young, learn that sometimes they can get away with it, so they will try to break the rules just to see if today is the day. Being consistent can be hard at times, but it is worth it in the long run.

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your child has to eat their vegetables before getting dessert at their grandparent’s house, just like when they are at home. Make sure to talk to family members about your rules so they are on the same page as you. This way, your child knows what to expect at all of their relatives’ houses. • Every night you follow the same bedtime routine: take a bath, brush teeth, read a story, and get tucked in. This night, however, your toddler is crying and wants to keep playing. It is important that you try to stick to your routine. Remind your child that you do this every night. It may be helpful if you make your routine into a song that you can sing together. When you start singing it or reminding your child, encourage them to follow you and begin the bedtime routine. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your teenager wants to go to a friend’s house who, in the past, they have gotten into trouble with. Be sure that you and your parenting partner are on the same page about whether that is allowed or not. If the teen does not get the answer they want from one parent, they should not be able to go to the other parent and get a different answer. • It is a rule in your house that your children have to take turns washing the dishes after dinner. One of your children is complaining about it being their turn tonight, and you are so tired and do not want to deal with it. Instead of letting them skip the chore, try to be consistent and get them to wash the dishes. Remind them that all the siblings take turns every night, and that it would not be fair for them to skip their turn.



Natural Consequences

Natural consequences happen without involvement from the parent. They are consequences that happen naturally as a result of the behavior. If your child does not wear a jacket outside even though you told them to, they will be cold and learn they should wear a jacket in the future. Natural consequences help children understand the reasons for various rules their parents put in place. Sometimes the best way for a child to learn is to learn through this type of firsthand experience. ***Do not use natural consequences when your children or others could be in danger or get seriously hurt. For example, if it is below freezing outside, it is not okay to allow your child to go out without warm clothing or a coat because that could be dangerous to their health.***

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your 3-year-old never wants to put their toys away after playing with them. Instead of cleaning them all up yourself, you could allow them to experience the natural consequence of losing a favorite toy. Since they did not put the toy where it belongs, they cannot find it. You can explain that this is why we put our toys back where they belong. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your 14-year-old often forgets their school assignments at home. One day, they forget the field trip permission slip that you already signed. Instead of taking the permission form to them, you could allow them to learn from the natural consequence. They would not be able to join the class on the field trip and they might learn to be more responsible with their school assignments. This is a good opportunity to practice always putting important information in the same place in their book bag.



Example—Be a Good One!

Children learn from you! Children copy what they see. They watch you all the time to see how you handle emotions and respond to situations. They learn how to behave from you. So you need to follow the same rules you want them to follow: share with others, be nice to people, do not throw things or yell when you are angry, and take deep breaths and practice self-soothing when your emotions are high.

Young Children	Older Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing is an important behavior that young children must learn. Let them see you sharing with others, such as sharing your umbrella with someone who does not have one or giving your extra bottle of water to someone at the ballpark. You can also show your young children how to self-regulate. When you notice yourself getting frustrated, try closing your eyes and taking several deep breaths. Getting more oxygen to your lungs and slowing your breathing can help lower your heart rate and calm you. Showing your children that you can take a moment and calm yourself will help them learn to do the same thing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In later childhood years, peer relationships become more important and romantic relationships begin to emerge. Demonstrate how close friends and romantic partners should treat each other by treating your friends and partners well and insisting that they treat you well, too. Be kind, patient, and forgiving with them. Manage conflict with problem-solving and without blame or name-calling. Treat them with respect and make sure your child sees you being treated in the same manner. This will give them a good example of how to be in healthy relationships and partnerships. Be honest with your children when you make a mistake. This helps them learn that honesty is the best policy, even when it does not make us look great. It also helps them recognize that we all make mistakes sometimes and that is OK.

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