Discipline for school-age children

As a parent, our primary role is to protect our children from danger. However, we also want to ensure our children grow up to be emotionally mature, self-assured adults. This means helping children develop values; responsibility; positive self-esteem and respect for themselves and others.



Discipline can help instil these values—by providing rules, we help children distinguish right from wrong and provide guidelines for appropriate behaviour. It is the parents' role to help children learn how to live co-operatively with others.

Discipline versus punishment

Discipline and punishment are not the same. As Barbara Coloroso, author of "Kids Are Worth It" suggests, "children can learn from their mistakes and change their behaviour without punishment. Punishment arouses resentment and does not teach a child anything constructive." On the other hand, treating children with respect and setting limits are more effective approaches to train children about self-control and responsibility. Coloroso notes that discipline, or limit setting:

- Points out what the child did wrong
- Gives them ownership of the problem
- Provides a way to solve it
- Leaves the child's dignity intact

What type of discipline is appropriate for school-age children?

As they reach school age, children become increasingly independent. They spend more time away from the home and begin to choose their own friends and activities. There are now authority figures, other than their parents, having an impact on their lives and their views—teachers, principals, coaches, etc.

As children become more independent, they rely less on their parents' limit setting, and need to become self-disciplined. Yet, while school-age children want to have more control over their lives, they are not always able to use the reason and judgement required. Parents need to act more as supervisors, rather than protectors. They need to demonstrate good behaviour and set a few clear and well-understood rules that they and their children can live by and which are consistently followed.

Laying the ground rules

Regardless of their age, children need rules and expectations to learn appropriate behaviour. Since we all learn from experience, especially children, establishing logical consequences for misbehaviour can help children learn that they are accountable for their actions. To establish limits, rules and consequences for school-age children, parents should first determine their own expectations, and then discuss these with their children. Remember, the foundation of effective discipline is mutual respect and trust. To help parents develop a discipline strategy, the Canadian Paediatric Society offers the following advice:

Apply rules consistently.

- Ignore unimportant and irrelevant behaviour (for example—swinging legs while waiting)
- Set reasonable and consistent limits—consequences need to be realistic
- State acceptable and appropriate behaviour that is attainable
- Prioritize rules—give top priority to your children's safety, then to correcting behaviour that harms people and property and then behaviour such as whining, temper tantrums and interrupting; concentrate on two or three rules at first
- Know and accept age-appropriate behavior
- Allow for the child's temperament and individuality

Apply consequences.

- Apply consequences as soon as possible
- Do not enter into arguments with the child during the correction process
- Make the consequences brief—for example, a time-out should last one minute per year of child's age
- Parents should mean what they say and say it without shouting—verbal abuse is no less damaging than harsh, excessive spanking
- Follow consequences with love and trust and make sure the child knows the correction is directed against the behaviour not the person

(Psychosocial Paediatrics Committee, Canadian Paediatric Society)

Family meetings. Holding regular family meetings can be one way of ensuring that everyone has a say in the household rules. These can be held weekly or monthly, at a regular time, around the kitchen table or in the family room—whatever works for you.

These meetings offer an opportunity to set rules, consequences and family goals. They should be short and business-like, and they should not focus on "what's wrong," but instead provide an opportunity for family members to offer compliments, acknowledge contributions and discuss how everyone is feeling. Over time, these meetings strengthen parent-child communication. They teach children about the democratic process and that their opinions are important.

Behaviour contracting. Written contracts can help with specific situations, if the child is old enough to read and understand what the contract is about. Contracts can help children and parents stay objective by focusing on the goal rather than on their feelings. They allow children to participate in establishing rules and consequences, preventing misunderstanding and procrastination because expectations are spelled out.

To be effective, contracts need to be mutually agreed on. Parents must treat the child as an equal during contract negotiations. Contracts should also be specific, spelling out what needs to happen, when and where, and who will monitor the activity. Finally, contracts need to include a reward or a "reinforcer".