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5 Simple Ways to Discipline without Punishment

Effective, non-punitive ways to help our children improve their behavior.

by Adina Soclof



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"Where did we ever get the crazy idea that to make children do better, we must first make them feel worse?" Jane Nelsen, Positive Discipline

Most parents are bewildered by their children's misbehavior, the adorable angelic baby has entered the terrible two's, where every request is met by an adamant "no". Their engaging school age child has entered their teens with a vengeance. But mostly it's the everyday stuff that keeps us on our toes, the whining, not putting their laundry away, leaving their room a mess, not coming when they are called, abusing their computer privileges, missing homework assignments, leaving their bike outside when you have told them not to.

It is at those times that out of sheer frustration we resort to the many forms of punishment. We take away their computer and video game time, and we send them to their room. We yell, chastise, lecture and tell our children that they better behave, or else!

Punishment is a popular method with parents but it is generally ineffective. When we make our kids feel bad for what they have done and we punish them, they don't usually feel sorry for what they did, nor do they think about how to do better the next time. They usually feel angry, defensive and vengeful. Punishment is known to makes kids lie more and devise sneakier ways to do what they want to do.

As parents we need to find non-punitive ways to help our children improve their behavior. We need to push them to examine their conscience and recalibrate their moral compass so that when we are not with them, they will do the right thing. We want them to look inside themselves and come up with ways to improve their own behavior.

This sounds like a tall order but it can be done. Here are 5 things to

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keep in mind when our kids misbehave so that we can help our kids look within themselves and work on improving their own behavior.

1. Let go of anger:

According to Maimonides, when our child does misbehaves we need to admonish them privately and in a gentle manner. That means that you cannot discipline a child when you are mad. Disciplining your child also requires the right motivation. You need to believe that you are reproaching your child solely because it is for their benefit.

When we yell at our kids and discipline when we are angry, we drown out that inner voice that should be telling them, "I have done something wrong. How can I make this better?"

Instead they are thinking, "Why is she yelling at me? What's the fastest way to make him stop? What is wrong with her? What is wrong with me?"

When we are calm, our kids can hear what we are telling them and our words have a better chance of getting through. They will not be expending their energies in protecting and defending themselves. You might even see that they are beginning to reflect on their actions and do a bit of soul-searching.

2. Serenity is key:

It is not easy to stay calm in the face of misbehavior. It is helpful though to remember that children usually don't misbehave on purpose, or just to bother you, or because they are truly bad. It's possible that they are just usually not aware of the rules, overwhelmed, tired, hungry or frustrated. If you assume that your child is basically good, but just having some bad moments you will find yourself less prone to getting angry and resorting to punishment as a disciplinary tool.

3. I know you didn't mean to...

Now that we are calm and have our child's best interest in mind, and we have noted that they don't usually mean to be bad, what should we do when they still misbehave?

We can and should admonish our children. However, we want to do it in a way that lets them know that we have faith in their basic goodness. We also want to leave them room to save face. This allows them to face their own misbehavior and listen to their moral conscience:

You might start off by saying,

"I know you didn't mean too...your bike was left outside in the rain last night."

"You usually don't behave in this way...I saw that you pushed Noah off of the swing..."

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“You probably didn't know this was a problem...taking toys from your class without letting your teacher know is not allowed.”

“I know this was probably a one time thing...however the rules of curfew need to be kept.”

Then we need gently direct them to find ways to make amends. We can say:

“Your bike needs to be towed down and put away. While your doing that, try to think of a few ways to help you remember to put your bike away next time.”

“Noah looks pretty upset. Can you think of anything that would make him feel better?”

“Let's make sure to return this toy to Mrs. G tomorrow. Can we tell her that we understand the rules now? School toys stay in school.”

“I need to know that curfew will be adhered to. Any ideas on how you this can be avoided in the future?”

This gentle approach helps them think about what they have done wrong, does not push them to defend their actions while letting them know that we believe they are capable of setting things right.

4. Give lots of attention to their positive behavior

Kids need attention. Ironically, the more attention we give to our kid's bad behavior, even negative attention, like punishing or yelling, the more we reinforce that behavior. So if your young child squeezes her baby brother just a little bit too tightly we usually spend a lot of time admonishing them:

“Stop squeezing your baby brother so tight. It is not nice! It hurts him!”

This just lets them know that if they need attention they just need to squeeze their baby brother hard.

It's better teach her how to touch the baby appropriately and make a big deal of that:

“Look, you know how to touch the baby gently. You put your hand on her arm and her leg. That is where you can touch the baby.”

This works for older kids too. If your child didn't want to come to dinner but came and grumbled the whole time, we might expend a lot of energy pointing out their inappropriate behavior:

“You are such a grump! You need to stop complaining! This is not the way you behave at the dinner table!”

This inadvertently lets them know that grumpiness gets them the

attention they need.

Instead we can focus on the fact that he came anyway, despite his resistance:

“I know you didn’t want to come to dinner. We really appreciate that you made the effort to join us. We are really glad you are here. When you are ready, I would love to hear about your school trip.”

5. Discipline Firmly and Kindly

Faber and Mazlish in their book, *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen*, outlines simple steps that parents can take to discipline their children.

When you have asked your child for the 10th time to get off of the computer and he has not complied you can:

1. EXPRESS STRONG DISSAPPROVAL:	I get frustrated when children do not get off the computer when they are asked.
2. STATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS:	I expect that children follow the rules that we made for computer use in this house
3. SHOW THE CHILD HOW TO MAKE AMENDS:	You can come off the computer now and let me know what your plans are for the next time you are on the computer. Let me

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4. OFFER A CHOICE:	Would you like to turn off the computer or would you just like to close the lid?
5. LET THE CHILD EXPERIENCE THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS BEHAVIOR:	I am putting away the laptop for a few days now. When you have time we will talk about some ideas that you may have so that the rules can be followed.

The key here is to remain calm, neutral and non-confrontational.

Disciplining kids without punishment can be done. Keeping calm, helping kids think they are capable and that we have faith in them, and letting them feel the consequences of their behavior are all ways that can work.

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