



Positive Parenting and Discipline Strategies from Toddler to Teens

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Have you ever heard the adage, “Parenting is the toughest job in the world?” Have you ever gotten that e-mail about the 24/7 nature of the parenting job description? Few can argue about the immeasurable joy being a parent brings AND the challenges and frustrations that often accompany this!

Being a single parent adds an additional challenge. Often dual parenting brings complimentary styles where one parent may be the stronger disciplinarian, but when you are the “chief, cook and bottle washer” there isn’t back-up for the challenging times. One of the toughest parts of being the sole disciplinarian is how to set firm limits and still be respected by your child. Parents often struggle with wanting to be liked or being a friend to their children. This is an unrealistic expectation because it is very difficult to be firm and consistent while seeking your child’s approval. With that said, sometimes we have to be the bad guy to be effective.

I recently read that “parenting solo can be like flying on a trapeze without a safety net,” as single parents face the same challenges as their friends who are married but have to do this without the backup support from a spouse. While the key to being a parent remains developing loving relationships with our children, we have so many other roles. We are mentors, historians, judges, counselors, and teachers to name a few. We are not peers, nor are we children’s friends. We can, however, still have a fun, loving relationship with our children throughout their childhood.

Discipline is not just punishment or telling our children what they have done wrong. It is about teaching our children to eventually monitor their own behavior and self-correct. Our goal is to help our children become responsible adults. The key is to have a secure base with our kids while using consistent strategies to deal with misbehavior. Most parents do the best job they can but often worry it isn’t good enough.

The following suggestions are meant to help you guide your children through life until the day they can exhibit self-control.

Establish ground rules: Children testing parental limits is a healthy part of their growth and development but you cannot be an effective disciplinarian without ground rules. Pick 3-5 rules and put them in place before misbehavior occurs. Review them with your kids and reinforce them from time to time. Having ground rules reinforces your expectations while raising your child’s awareness of their own behavior. This may be as simple as no hitting or homework is completed before watching television.

Use Praise: While focusing on your child's strengths and praising them for good behavior is easy to do with pre-schoolers, it may become more of a challenge when parenting a teenager. Always remember what you love most about your child and praise, praise, praise especially during times of conflict in your relationship with them. Children crave parental approval at all ages, even if they appear cavalier about it.

Set Boundaries: Children need to know where parents "draw the line" and when boundaries are communicated to them, it reinforces that you know they are capable of managing their own behavior but may need some input. For a younger child, you may allow them to play outside alone but reinforce that they are not allowed to leave the backyard. For a teenager, you may reinforce that cursing or derogatory language is not appropriate.

Redirect: Effective with young children, redirecting their attention or distracting them can help prevent a temper tantrum. With a toddler, replacing an activity to distract them from putting items into the DVD player can end the problematic behavior successfully.

Time-Out: Another effective strategy for younger or school-aged children, time outs send the message that your child needs to be removed from a situation for a period of time to help them gain control over their behavior. It is effective when the parent does not engage in conversation during this time. Find a quiet place away from you and use the rule of 1 minute per year of age.

Ignore behavior: For minor misbehaviors especially with older children and teens, ignoring what transpires can often be very effective. If your child is yelling or screaming at you, walking out of the room to another area of the house can help them to gain control of themselves. Staying there and arguing and lecturing just fuels a power struggle which your teen will try very hard to win!

Loss of Privileges: Taking away privileges can be a powerful tool after your child is too old for time-out. It may be taking away a favorite toy or a teenager's cell phone. Make sure you reinforce the distinction between "privileges" and "rights" as you use this strategy.

Natural Consequences: I am a firm believer that suffering natural consequences can be one of the most effective strategies for our older children. Our gut as a parent tells us to protect our children and insulate them from outside consequences (police, school) but allowing your child to experience firsthand the unsettling results of their behavior can be the best lesson taught. For example, my 16 year old was procrastinating in the morning before school. After discussing with him that his morning routine wasn't working we came up with a set time that he would need to be in the car to get a ride to school. I then told him that if he didn't leave the house by that set time, he would need to walk to school. The next day, he was 10 minutes late and I enforced the rule in hopes that walking the mile to school would result in him being late and needing to report to the office. I was a little surprised when he told me that he ran the whole way and got to school on time! Nevertheless, allowing him to experience the consequences of potentially being late for school resulted in him never being late for his ride again!