

PARENTS MONTHLY

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Dos and Don'ts of Discipline: How to Be a Positive Parent While Correcting Negative Behavior

Next to love, one of the best gifts parents and caregivers can give their children is a clear and consistent set of limits. Because discipline often is confused with punishment, many parents and caregivers may be reluctant to discipline their children; however, doing so is crucial.

According to Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, one of America's leading pediatricians, discipline teaches children acceptable boundaries to prevent them from making mistakes, whereas punishment simply addresses negative behavior and doesn't help children learn from the experience.

"Proper discipline not punishment is critical to the growth of a healthy and happy child," says Julie Gallelo, executive director of First 5 Yolo. "The challenges of raising a child can sometimes leave parents wondering how to set appropriate limits."

First 5 Yolo offers the following tips for correcting negative behavior while still being a positive parent.

Dos of Discipline

Set age-appropriate limits. Keep your child's age in mind when thinking about discipline. Children do not understand the concept of "yes" and "no" until they are approximately 12 months old. At this age, they'll begin to test limits. Children's ability to understand "right" from "wrong" develops as they get older.

Be consistent. It is important to stick with the rules and consequences you set. If you don't, your child isn't likely to stick to them either. Consistency helps your child learn that his or her behavior has a specific result. Inconsistency confuses children and encourages them to test limits.

Include your child in the solution. Help your child learn from mistakes by including him or her in the solution. For example, if your child purposely spills a cup of milk, give him or her a cloth to clean it up.

Teach acceptable behavior. Children learn by experimenting. For example, a baby who keeps throwing a spoon off the high chair is not purposefully misbehaving; he or she just thinks it's a game when those nearby keep picking it up. Instead of simply saying "no," redirect your child's

attention to more acceptable behavior. In this situation, remove the spoon and help your child drink from his or her cup.

Be encouraging. Use praise and encouragement whenever possible to promote good behavior. Praise is especially effective when it's specific. Rather than just saying, "Good job," say, "You did a good job putting your toy back where it belongs." Remember that a little praise goes a long way.

Model appropriate behavior. Your child watches you closely for cues on how to behave. Children imitate their parents and caregivers; the old saying "Do as I say, not as I do" doesn't work with kids. Be calm, but firm, when setting limits, and model behaviors such as sharing and saying "please" and "thank you."

Don'ts of Discipline

Never use physical punishment. Shaking or hitting your child is never appropriate. Physical punishment teaches your child that violence is a way to solve problems. Young children tend not to learn from physical punishment because they don't usually see the connection between their behavior and physical punishment.

Don't shame or belittle a child. When your child misbehaves, be sure to tell him or her clearly that it's his or her behavior that's unacceptable. Shaming or belittling your child damages self-esteem. Use a respectful, encouraging tone of voice and avoid harsh words. This helps prevent hurting your child's self-image and promotes your child's willingness to cooperate.

Avoid gifts. Do not give items, particularly food, to reward good behavior. Instead, use smiles, nods, or verbal praise to tell your child that you approve.

Don't communicate fear. Proper discipline helps children behave well because they want to, not because they are afraid of being punished. Once your child becomes a toddler, you can start reasoning with him or her and explain why certain behaviors are not allowed and have consequences. As children begin to understand the power of words, it is important to be as clear as possible.

About First 5 Yolo

Research shows a child's brain develops most dramatically in the first five years and what parents and caregivers do during these years to support their child's growth will have a meaningful impact throughout life. In November 1998, California voters passed a statewide ballot initiative to add a 50-cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes. The funds collected are utilized to fund education, health, and childcare programs that promote early childhood development from prenatal through age 5. For more information about First 5 Yolo, visit www.First5Yolo.org.