



Virginia Cooperative Extension

Virginia Tech • Virginia State University

Publication 350-113

discipline for young children

lesson 4

To Prevent Misbehavior

Valya Telep, Former Extension Specialist, Child Development, Virginia State University

Reviewed by Novella Ruffin, Family and Human Development Specialist, Virginia State University



www.ext.vt.edu

Produced by Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, 2019

Virginia Cooperative Extension programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, veteran status, or any other basis protected by law. An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia State University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. Edwin J. Jones, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg; M. Ray McKinnie, Administrator, 1890 Extension Program, Virginia State University, Petersburg.

VT/0419/350-113

Discipline for Young Children

Lesson 4: To Prevent Misbehavior

It is easier on the parent and the child to keep misbehavior from happening than to deal with it afterward.

Many behavior problems are really the parent's problem. If you find yourself continually facing misbehavior, STOP and LOOK closely at your own behavior.

Ask yourself:

1. Am I making it easy for my child to behave well?
2. Do I provide interesting play things?
3. Are my rules reasonable? Am I consistent in enforcing them?
4. Do I use more Do's than Don'ts?
5. Do I let the child make choices?
6. Are they choices I can live with?

You need to plan ahead to prevent behavior problems. It is hard work, but the results are worth it.

Here are some suggestions for preventing behavior problems. Try them and see if they work for you. See if you and your child enjoy each other more.

Give each suggestion a two-week trial period.
It may take that long to see results.

Try only one new technique at a time. Changing the way you treat your child is hard to do.

It takes time to form new habits. Once you have the habit though, it will seem natural to you.



Anticipate Trouble

Sometimes changing the setting will prevent trouble before it starts. Look around your house to see what is causing misbehavior. After all, the house is as much the child's home as it is the parents'.

Infants and Toddlers

For infants and toddlers, changing the setting means child-proofing the home. Put anything that is breakable, valuable, or dangerous out of reach. Child-proofing the home allows the child to learn about all the interesting things around them and frees the parents from constant "no-no's."

The child at this age has a tremendous urge to explore his world, to learn about his world by touching and tasting everything he can get his hands on. It is perfectly normal for a nine month-old child to put everything in his mouth. He picks up dirt on the floor and tastes it; he lifts and feels the lamp; and he pulls all the towels off the shelf. You can prevent this by keeping the floor clean, placing the lamp out of reach, locking the linen closet, and getting some safe things for him to bang and chew on. This not only keeps the child from being frustrated, but is a reasonable action for safety reasons as well.

Some parents refuse to child-proof the home. They worry about what their neighbors will say. They think they must teach the child not to bother things; however, they are just making life miserable for themselves and the child. Toddlerhood is the time for exploration. Once the child can talk and understand language, you can teach him to respect your property.

Preschoolers

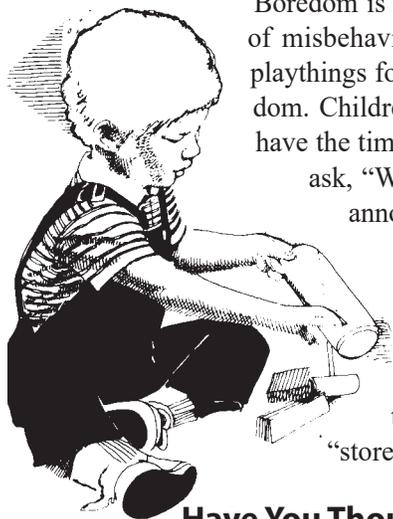
Ask yourself, "What in our home makes it hard for children to behave?" Do they have shelves or boxes to keep their toys in? Are hooks placed low so that they can hang up their coats by themselves? Do they have a safe place to play outside? Do they have other children to play with?

Changing the setting means making it easy for the child, such as giving him his own place to keep his toys, interesting things to play with, and safe places to play. It means, for example, provid-

ing wide, heavy-bottomed plastic glasses that won't break or tip over easily so that milk isn't spilled at every meal.

Changing the setting is often a hassle-free way to prevent misbehavior.

Providing Interesting Play Things



Boredom is one of the leading causes of misbehavior. Providing interesting playthings for the child prevents boredom. Children involved in play don't have the time or the need to whine, to ask, "What can I do now?" or to annoy baby brother.

Playthings need not be expensive. Often babies would rather play with pots and pans than with an expensive, "store-bought" toy.

Have You Thought Of:

Swings made from old tires

Crayons

A tree-house

Empty boxes

Old catalogues with pictures to cut

Rope – to jump, to climb

Paste – 1/2 cup flour, 1 cup boiling water, add flour to the boiling water and stir over low heat until thick and shiny. Let cool. Can be kept in a covered container to use again.

Balls – to kick, throw, and bounce

Finger paint – add cake coloring to thick, liquid laundry starch.

Fabric scraps – to paste or make doll clothes

Hammer, nails, and an old tree stump

Think Like A Child

Practice thinking like a child. Children are born with a lot of courage to try and do things they see adults doing. They watch us and copy us. Like adults, children are interested in doing a good job. Unlike adults, however, children are more concerned with learning and doing than they are with producing a quality product.

Discouragement sets in when Dad only notices the dirty spots that Dennis missed when he helped wash the car. Instead, Dad might say something like, "Now that we've washed the big dirt off, let's go back and do the smaller spots."

Other examples are:

"Well, I see that you're learning to make the bed just like Mommy. Would you like me to show you how I get the wrinkles out?"

"Well, I see that you're learning how to use the broom – I bet that feels good."

Quality improves with practice, encouragement, and by modeling adults. Enjoy not having to pass judgment on the work of children during the times when they are learning.

Parents are great at making rules. "Don't run in the house." "Don't cross the street by yourself." "Use your napkin." Sometimes they punish the child for breaking a rule and sometimes they don't. The results are frustrated children and irritated parents.

Children are less likely to misbehave if rules are reasonable, consistently enforced, and flexible.

Rules Should Be Reasonable

Children need rules. They feel secure when they know what is expected of them. Rules need to be carefully thought out, however, not made up on the spur of the moment when mother or father has run out of patience or has a headache. What rules have you issued this past week?

List them.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

If you can't remember them, don't expect your child to.

Reasons for the rules should be explained to the child. Show him that they make sense. He will be more likely to observe the rules if he understands the reasons for them.

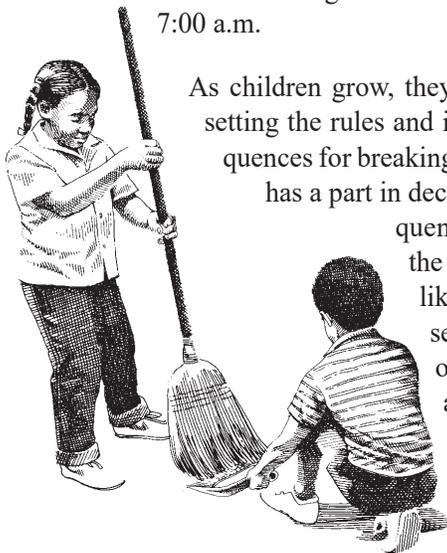


Rules Should Be Consistently Enforced

If slamming the door is ignored on Monday, but the child is sent to his room for slamming the door on Tuesday, he doesn't know what to expect. To keep the child from feeling confused and frustrated, be consistent. This way, the child can predict your behavior. "If I (do this), then (this will happen). Parents need to follow through on what they say. If a child is promised a treat, he should get a treat. If consequences are stated, then consequences should be sure and swift. Children soon learn that rules can be ignored if parents do not follow through on enforcing them.

Your family may set a rule on everyone eating breakfast together at 7:00 a.m. Karen, five, takes forever to get dressed and comes to breakfast when everyone has already eaten. Father says if the same thing happens tomorrow, Karen will miss breakfast and not have a chance for a snack until noon. The next day, Karen is late; she is told in a matter-of-fact way that, since she knows the rules, she will not eat until noon.

She becomes hungry and asks for food but mother refuses. The next morning Karen arises for breakfast at 7:00 a.m.



As children grow, they may be included in setting the rules and in deciding on consequences for breaking the rules. If the child has a part in deciding what the consequences are for breaking the rule, he will be more likely to view the consequences as the result of his own behavior and not as undeserved punishment. It will help him learn to take responsibility for his behavior.

Write them down.

Rules

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now, examine each rule, asking the following questions:

Is it necessary for the child's safety?

Is it necessary for the safety or well-being of others?

Can it be enforced?

Consequences

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Is it necessary for the protection of property?

What does this help the child learn?

Effective rules help children learn responsibility for their own behavior and cut down on misbehavior.

Learning to use "do's" rather than "don't's" is very difficult, especially if parents already have the "don't" habit. It is really hard to change your way of talking to your child. Using "do's" rather than "don't's" requires much thought and practice, but it will result in a happier, better behaved child.

Give Gentle Reminders

Gentle reminders, when spoken without sarcasm or as a "put-down," give children the security they need in order to maintain their self-control.

Use Do's Instead of Don't's

An effective way to prevent misbehavior is to tell the child what you want him to do. Instead of saying "No," "Don't," and "Stop that!" over and over, tell the child exactly what it is you want him to do. For example, instead of yelling at the child to keep his feet off the chair, tell him "Chairs are not for feet. Floors are for feet." Some more examples are:

Don't's

"Don't drag your coat on the ground."

"Don't squeeze the kitten."

"Don't run down the driveway."

Do's

"Hold the coat this way."

"Carry the kitten this way."

"Grass is for running on."

Old Response

"Please sit down and wait."
"Everyone is supposed to be helping cleanup."
"Janet, please don't tease your brother."
"Keep your hands off those papers."
"Don't leave that there, pick it up."
"Please be quiet and listen."
"It's nap time. Everyone be quiet."

Gentle Reminder

"Waiting."
"John, Susan, Helping."
"Leaving Scot alone, Please." or "Playing nicely."
"Not touching."
"Picking it up."
"Listening."
"Resting."

For example, when we say, "We don't run in the house," children may think "You don't but I do." When they hear, "Don't run in the house," they may think, "OK. Next time." But if they hear, "Walking," they slow down immediately. To the child, "Walking" has the same effect as the order "Stop running right now."

Gentle reminders work equally well on older children in preventing misbehavior. When they are said with a smile on your face and without anger, children will usually turn their behavior around. If we sound angry or threatening, we encourage anger and defiance. The message to the child is, "I don't trust or respect you."

Behavior	Gentle Reminder
clenched fists ready to fight	"Touching softly"
quarreling	"Discussing"
foul language	"Talking nicely"

Caring Humor

Children respond beautifully to a cheerful attitude and light-hearted responses. This brand of humor does not include sarcasm or putdowns, but rather the ability to laugh at ourselves and love our "humanness." A note of humor can often defuse a tense situation and encourage healthy ways of coping.

What we model is what we get. Children learn by imitating the people they love. If mother yells and calls Lisa a brat for snatching her sister's doll, Lisa will learn to yell and call people names when things don't go her way. If Lisa's father gets mad and loses his temper when the car won't start, Lisa will learn to lose her temper when faced with a problem.

On the other hand, the parent who shows concern for the child's injuries, yet doesn't baby him too much, is indirectly helping the child learn consideration for others.

Whenever possible, give children a choice between two acceptable behaviors. For example, say, "Randy, it really disturbs me when you run in the house. You can either play with your cars or go outside and play." Giving a choice lets the child learn to make decisions.

You aren't really giving a choice when you offer two undesirable choices. For example, Rick is beating his drum and mother says, "Rick, you can either stop that or you won't get your allowance this week!" Rick wouldn't like either of those choices.

When giving children choices make sure they are choices you can live with. For example, suppose the temperature is 32° outside and Robin is going out to play in a spring dress. Since this is an unacceptable choice, you may say

Old Response

"No. That piece doesn't fit there."
"Don't push her. She doesn't like that."
"Get up and help the rest of us clean up for lunch."

Lighthearted Response

"Oh, oh. We goofed that time, didn't we?"
"John, I think you're an earthquake. Let's see you shake yourself all over like an earthquake. They don't last long, do they?"
"Oh, oh. Are your muscles turning to noodles? Come on. We really need your help."

something like, “Feel free to play inside when you wear that dress. When you’re ready to go outside, here are your heavy pants and sweater.”

Giving choices is one way to prevent misbehavior, and, at the same time, help your child learn to make decisions.

Get The Child’s Attention

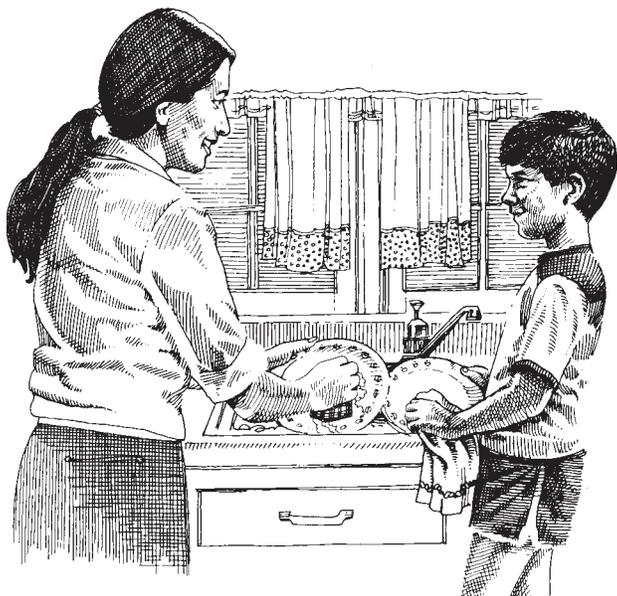
Call the child’s name and get her attention before giving instructions. For example, say, “Clare,” and wait until she looks at you, then say, “Please wash your hands for lunch now.” Sometimes you may need to go to Clare and place your hand on her shoulder to get her attention.

Many times children are accused of being rude and “not minding” when they really don’t hear what their parents asked them to do.

Children can pay attention to only one thing at a time. Their minds don’t work like adults who can watch the evening news, prepare dinner, and think about what they are going to do that weekend.

If children are involved in their play, it takes time for them to shift their attention to parents.

Give children a 10 to 15 minute warning before you expect them to do something, such as come to dinner, take a nap, or go shopping with you. For example, Patrick is playing outside. Say, “You need to come inside soon. Dinner will be ready in 15 minutes.” If possible, allow him to finish whatever he is doing. Patrick doesn’t like to be interrupted when he is busy



playing anymore than you like to be interrupted when you are reading a book or watching your favorite TV show.

Children are more likely to respond to your request agreeably when you give them a warning time than when you say, “Right now!” “This minute!” “Quick!” Children don’t understand what the “hurry” is all about. They don’t have the same sense of time you do.



To Prevent Misbehavior

To Discipline Effectively, Think About These Ideas:

1. It is easier on parent and child to prevent misbehavior than to deal with it afterward.
2. Providing interesting things for children to play with keeps them out of mischief.
3. Rules which are reasonable, flexible, and consistently enforced cut down on misbehavior.
4. Parents can reduce misbehavior by setting examples of calmness, soft words, and kindness.
5. Allowing a child to make a choice between two acceptable behaviors helps prevent misbehavior.
6. Children are more likely to do what you ask if you get their attention before giving instructions.
7. When children are involved in play, they need a 10 to 15 minute warning before changing activities.

Cherry, Clare. Please Don’t Sit On The Kids. Belmont, CA: Pitman Learning, Inc. 1983.

See How Much You Have Learned!

	True	False
1. Child-proofing the home spoils the child.	_____	_____
2. It takes expensive toys to keep a child interested in play.	_____	_____
3. Rules should never be changed.	_____	_____
4. Children behave better when parents tell them what they want them to do rather than saying “No,” “Don’t,” and “Stop” all day long.	_____	_____
5. Children will swear, yell, and lie if their parents swear, yell, and lie.	_____	_____
6. Giving a child a choice shows that the parent is too easy on the child.	_____	_____

Practice Exercises

1. Choose one suggestion for preventing misbehavior and try it for two weeks.
2. Change at least one thing in your house to make it easier for your child to behave well.
3. Decide how you would handle the following situations:

Three year old Sharon is watching TV and it is her bedtime.

Jim keeps pestering mother for a cookie. Lunch will be ready in an hour and mother doesn’t want him to eat a cookie now.

John and Matt sit on the same side of the dinner table. Suddenly they fall into the usual pattern of kicking and hitting



- 6. F
- 5. T
- 4. T
- 3. F
- 2. F
- 1. F

A Record of my Discipline Practices and Their Effects*

Complete one week after studying Lesson 4.

Check the blanks that apply to you.

1. The way I usually discipline:

_____ Yell and scream

_____ Isolate

_____ Explain reasons calmly

_____ Spank

_____ Remove privileges

_____ Let the child experience the consequences

_____ Give choices

_____ Threaten, but don't follow through

_____ Show disapproval

_____ Distract

_____ Ignore misbehavior

_____ Scold

2. During the past week, I:

More

Less

About the same

Acted calmly

Acted firmly and kindly

Used kind words, not unkind words

Gave choices and let the child learn from the consequences

3. The atmosphere in our home has changed to one of:

More

Less

About the same

Friendliness

Cooperation

Understanding

Confusion

Fun

Hostility

Tension

*Adapted from Practical Education for Parenting by Kent G. Hamdorf, Extension Specialist, Human Relations Family Development, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1978.