



KEEP YOUR KIDS IN
LINE WITH THESE
SIMPLE STRATEGIES.

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TODDLERS BEHAVING BADLY

as a 2-year-old, Nathaniel Lampros, of Sandy, Utah, was fascinated with toy swords and loved to duel with Kenayde, his 4-year-old sister. But inevitably, he'd whack her in the head, she'd dissolve in tears, and Angela, their mother, would come running to see what had happened. She'd ask Nathaniel to apologize, as well as give Kenayde a hug and make her laugh to pacify hurt feelings. If he resisted, Angela would put her son in time-out.

"I worried that Nathaniel would never outgrow his rough behavior, and there were days when I'd get so frustrated with him that I'd end up crying," recalls Lampros, now a mother of four. "But I really wanted Nathaniel to play nicely, so I did my best to teach him how to do it."

For many mothers, doling out effective discipline is one of

the toughest and most frustrating tasks of parenting, a seemingly never-ending test of wills between you and your child. Because just when your 2-year-old "gets" that she can't thump her baby brother in the head with a doll, she'll latch on to another bothersome behavior—and the process starts anew.

What exactly does it mean to "discipline" a toddler? Some people equate it with spanking and punishment, but that's *not* what we're talking about. As many parenting experts see it, discipline is about setting rules to stop your little one from engag-



ing in behavior that's aggressive (hitting and biting), dangerous (running out in the street), and inappropriate (throwing food). It's also about following through with consequences when he breaks the rules—or what Linda Pearson, a Denver-based psychiatric nurse practitioner who specializes in family and parent counseling, calls “being a good boss.” Here are seven strategies that can help you set limits and stop bad behavior.

1. PICK YOUR BATTLES. “If you’re always saying, ‘No, no, no,’ your child will tune out the no and won’t understand your priorities,” says Pearson, author of *The Discipline Miracle* (AMACOM, 2005). “Plus you can’t possibly follow through on all of the no’s.” Define what’s important to you, set limits accordingly, and follow through with appropriate consequences. Then ease up on little things that are annoying but otherwise fall into the “who cares?” category—the habits your child is likely to outgrow, such as insisting on wearing purple (and only purple).

For Anna Lucca, of Washington, D.C., that means letting her 2½-year-old daughter trash her bedroom before she dozes off for a nap. “I find books and clothes scattered all over the floor when Isabel wakes up, so she must get out of bed to play after I put her down,” Lucca says. “I tell her not to make a mess, but she doesn’t listen. Rather than try to catch her in the act and say, ‘No, no, no,’ I make her clean up right after her nap.” Lucca is also quick to praise Isabel for saying please and sharing toys

with her 5-month-old sister. “Hopefully, the positive reinforcement will encourage Isabel to do more of the good behavior—and less of the bad,” she says.

2. KNOW YOUR CHILD’S TRIGGERS. Some misbehavior is preventable—as long as you can anticipate what will spark it and you create a game plan in advance, such as removing tangible temptations. This strategy worked for Jean Nelson, of Pasadena, California, after her 2-year-old son took delight in dragging toilet paper down the hall, giggling as the roll

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unfurled behind him. “The first two times Luke did it, I told him, ‘No,’ but when he did it a third time, I moved the toilet paper to a high shelf in the bathroom that he couldn’t reach,” Nelson says. “For a toddler, pulling toilet paper is irresistible fun. It was easier to take it out of his way than to fight about it.”

If your 18-month-old is prone to grabbing cans off grocery store shelves, bring along some toys for him to play with in the cart while you’re shopping. If your 2-year-old won’t share her stuffed animals during playdates at home, remove them from

the designated play area before her pal arrives. And if your 3-year-old likes to draw on the walls, stash the crayons in an out-of-reach drawer and don't let him color without supervision. Also, some children act out when they're hungry, overtired, or frustrated from being cooped up inside, says Harvey Karp, MD, creator of the DVD and book *The Happiest Toddler on the Block* (Bantam, 2004). Make sure your child eats healthy snacks, gets enough sleep (a minimum of 10 hours at night, plus a one-

two-hour nap), and plays outside to burn off energy—even in chilly weather.

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3. BE CONSISTENT. "Between the ages of 2 and 3, children are working hard to understand how their behavior impacts the people around them," says Claire Lerner, LCSW, director of parenting resources with Zero to Three, a nationwide nonprofit promoting the healthy development of babies and toddlers. "If your reaction to a situation keeps changing—one day you let your son throw a ball in the house and the next you don't—you'll confuse him with mixed signals."

There's no timetable as to how many incidents and reprimands it will take before your child stops a certain misbehavior. But if you always respond the same way, he'll probably learn his lesson after four or five times. Consistency was key for Orly Isaacson, of Bethesda, Maryland, when her 18-month-old went through a biting phase. Each time Sasha chomped on Isaacson's

quince, says Linda Pearson, a Denver-based psychiatric nurse practitioner.

■ **At age 2** Your child is using her developing motor skills to test limits, by running, jumping, throwing, and climbing. She's speaking a few words at a time, she becomes frustrated when she can't get her point across, and she's prone to tantrums. She's also self-centered and doesn't like to share. "People call it the terrible twos, but it's really the 'autonomous twos,'" Dr. Coleman says. Consequences should be swift, as a 2-year-old is unable to grasp time. But since she still lacks impulse control, give her another chance soon after the incident, says Claire Lerner, LCSW, director of parenting resources with Zero to Three, a nationwide nonprofit promoting the healthy development of babies and toddlers.

■ **At age 3** Your child is now a chatterbox; he's using language to argue his point of view. Since he loves to be with

other children and has boundless energy, he may have a tough time playing quietly at home. "Taking a 3-year-old to a gym or karate class will give him the social contact he craves and let him release energy," says Harvey Karp, MD, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of California-Los Angeles Medical School. "At this age, kids need that as much as they need affection and food." He also knows right from wrong, understands cause and effect, and retains information for several hours. Consequences can be delayed for maximum impact, and explanations can be more detailed. For example, if he hurls Cheerios at his sister, remind him about the no-food-throwing rule and explain that if he does it again, he won't get to watch *Blues Clues*. If he continues to throw food, take it away from him. When he asks to watch TV, say, "Remember when Mommy told you not to throw cereal—and you did anyway? Well, Mommy said the consequence is no *Blues Clues* today!"



AGES & STAGES WHAT'S GOING ON DEVELOPMENTALLY

Effective discipline starts with understanding where your child falls on the developmental spectrum. Our guide:

■ **At 18 months** Your child is curious, fearless, impulsive, mobile, and clueless about the consequences of her actions—a recipe for trouble. "My image of an 18-month-old is a child who's running down the hall away from his mother but looking over his shoulder to see if she's there and then running some more," says William Coleman, MD, professor of

pediatrics at the Center for Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina Medical School, in Chapel Hill. "Though he's building a vocabulary and can follow simple instructions, he can't effectively communicate his needs or understand lengthy reprimands. He may bite or hit to register his displeasure—or to get your attention. Consequences of misbehavior must be immediate. Indeed, if you wait even ten minutes to react, he won't remember what he did wrong or tie his action to the conse-

finger, she used a louder-than-usual voice to correct her—“Noooooooooo, Sasha! Don’t bite! That hurts Mommy!”—and then handed her a toy as a distraction. “I’m very low-key, so raising my voice startled Sasha and got the message across fast,” she says. A caveat: by age 2, many kids learn how to make their parents lose resolve just by being cute. Don’t let your child’s tactics sway you—no matter how cute (or clever) they are.

4. DON'T GET EMOTIONAL. Sure, it’s hard to stay calm when your 18-month-old yanks the dog’s tail or your 3-year-old refuses to brush his teeth for the gazillionth night in a row.



But if you scream in anger, the message you’re trying to send will get lost and the situation will escalate—*fast*. “When a child is flooded with a parent’s negative mood, he’ll see the emotion and won’t hear what you’re saying,” explains William Coleman, MD, professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina Medical School, in Chapel Hill. Indeed, an angry reaction will only enhance the entertainment value for your child, so resist the urge to raise your voice. Take a deep breath, count to three, and get down to your child’s eye level. Be fast and firm, serious and stern when you deliver the reprimand.

A TIME-OUT WORKS FOR THE BIG-TIME “NO-NO’S.”

5. KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE. If you’re like most first-time mothers, you tend to reason with your child when she breaks rules, offering detailed explanations about what she did wrong and issuing detailed threats about the privileges she’ll lose if she doesn’t stop misbehaving. But as a discipline strategy, overtalking is as ineffective as becoming overly emotional, warns Dr. Coleman.

While an 18-month-old lacks the cognitive ability to understand complex sentences, a 2- or 3-year-old with more devel-

oped language skills still lacks the attention span to absorb what you’re saying. Instead, speak in short phrases, repeating them a few times and incorporating vocal inflections and facial expressions, Dr. Coleman advises. For example, if your 18-month-old swats your arm, say, “No, Jake! Don’t hit Mommy! That hurts! No hitting. No hitting.” A 2-year-old can comprehend a bit more: “Evan, no jumping on the sofa! No jumping. Jumping is dangerous—you could fall. No jumping!” And a 3-year-old can process cause and effect, so state the consequences of the behavior: “Ashley, your teeth need to be brushed. You can brush them—or I can brush them for you. You decide. The longer it takes, the less time we’ll have to read Dr. Seuss.”

6. GIVE A TIME-OUT. If repeated reprimands, redirection, and loss of privileges haven’t cured your child of his offending behavior, consider putting him in time-out—for a minute per year of age. “This is an excellent discipline tool for kids who are doing the big-time ‘no-no’s,’” Dr. Karp explains. Before imposing a time-out, put a serious look on your face and give a warning in a stern tone of voice (“I’m counting to three, and if you don’t stop, you’re going to time-out. One, two, THREE!”). If she doesn’t listen, take her to the quiet and safe spot you’ve designated for time-outs, and set a timer. When it goes off, ask her to apologize and give her a big hug to convey that you’re not angry. “Nathaniel hated going to time-out for hitting his sister

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with the plastic sword, but I was clear about the consequences and stuck with it,” says Angela Lampros. “After a few weeks, he learned his lesson.” Indeed, toddlers don’t like to be separated from their parents and toys, so eventually the mere threat of a time-out should be enough to stop them in their tracks.

7. STAY POSITIVE. No matter how frustrated you feel about your child’s misbehavior, don’t vent about it in front of him. “If people heard their boss at work say, ‘I don’t know what to do with my employees. They run the company, and I feel powerless to do anything about it,’ they’d lose respect for him and run the place even more,” says Pearson. “It’s the same thing when children hear their parents speak about them in a hopeless or negative way. They won’t have a good image of you as their boss, and they’ll end up repeating the behavior.”

Still, it’s perfectly normal to feel exasperated from time to time. If you reach that point, turn to your spouse, your pediatrician, or a trusted friend for support and advice.

Freelance writer Cynthia Hanson lives outside Philadelphia with her husband and well-behaved 5-year-old son.