

# Discipline Often Requires Creative Techniques

by Linda Reilly

**Disciplining** our children means teaching them appropriate behavior and self-control. The range of children's behavior is virtually unlimited. Every family needs a bag of tricks to meet this challenge.

This is far from an exhaustive list of disciplinary methods. Managing behavior requires patience, tact and creativity. Parents make mistakes, too. If an approach is not working, back up, reassess the situation (examine your values and beliefs regarding the behavior; ask yourself if your child is capable of doing what's expected, given her age; are there some family circumstances or sources of stress that the child is reacting to?), and try another approach. Children always give us many opportunities to deal with their behavior. Forgive yourself when you mishandle a situation—your child will. Get help if you feel you are losing control.

**Distraction:** Young children often respond well to a change of focus as a way of steering them away from a prohibited activity, or to reduce their disappointment after having been derailed.

**Reducing boredom:** Some children get into trouble when they are bored. Engaging them in an interesting activity or conversation will redirect their energies.

**Planned transitions:** Toddlers at times have difficulty changing activities; e.g., going from the house to the car. Preparing them for the transition and interesting them in the next activity may smooth this stress.

**Clear expectations:** Children need to know what behavior parents expect. Instructions should be stated simply (within the child's capability to understand), clearly, and with eye-to-eye contact. Tell the child why the behavior is important.

**Modeling:** Children imitate the behavior of others. Show your children how you want them to behave.

**Humor:** Many a tense moment can be relieved (and misbehavior avoided) by humor, silliness, or a hug. Use puppets! Sometimes a child will cooperate with a puppet's request while resisting yours.

**Praise and encouragement:** Children want to please! Use every opportunity to encourage appropriate behavior—it will double!

**Discussion:** Sometimes simply exploring why a child can't stand on a ladder (it's unsafe) is enough to discourage repetition.

**Rearranging the environment:** The environment can be modified (something taken away, added or changed) to avoid inappropriate behavior. For instance, if a child is pulling on plants, they can be removed.

**Rewards:** An occasional treat after an accomplishment will encourage that behavior.

**Listening to feelings:** A child comes in, picks on his brother, and throws his coat on the floor. The simple statement, “You look upset” can lead to some constructive discussion and problem solving. He will be more inclined then to pick up his coat and get along with his brother.

**Giving information:** “Blocks are for building, not for throwing.” Sometimes simple information will avert a confrontation.

**Stating your feelings:** “I-messages.” “I feel upset when I see toys all over the floor” will elicit a more cooperative reaction from the child than “You didn't pick up your toys again!”

**Forewarning:** Rehearse with a child before a planned event. For example, how to behave when you go into the grocery store—be specific!

**Substitution:** Offer a replacement object for one the child shouldn't have; e.g., hand baby a rattle when she reaches for your glasses.

**Ignoring:** Some behavior will subside more quickly if the parent ignores it. At times, paying attention to a behavior may cause it to increase. For example, making annoying noises in the car may increase if the parent invests it with too much attention.

**Natural consequences:** Allowing the child to experience cause and effect can avoid conflict. If he refuses to put on his coat, he most likely will when he feels the chill.

**Logical consequences:** In this case, the parent provides the consequence. “If you hit the cat, then the cat has to go outside to play.”

**Time-out:** The child is given a warning which provides an opportunity to correct misbehavior. If the behavior persists, the child is calmly taken to “time-out,” a boring place, for a few minutes (one minute per year of age). Lectures or discussion after a time-out is not recommended.

**Physical removal:** Remove the child physically, then redirect her play. Many parents use this when the child is in an unsafe situation.

Many parents use physical methods such as slapping hands and spanking. These parents report that spanking instantly stops the behavior and clears the air. However, parents frequently report feeling guilty after a spanking episode. Often parents complain that children continue to misbehave after a spanking.

It is important to consider some of the disadvantages and negative side effects of using physical punishment. These are:

- Over and over again, we watch children imitate us. After being disciplined, children reenact the scene so we can observe them timing out a teddy bear or spanking it. They will also try these methods with their peers when frustrated. The child's playmate will ignore an order to take a time-out but will not ignore being hit! This particular imitated behavior will not be tolerated by peers, school personnel and other social groups. Do we want children to learn from parents that if one is bigger, one can hit someone else and get by with it?

- Spanking can set up a situation in which the child avoids guilty feelings for misbehavior. A child can interpret a spanking as due payment for the “crime,” and so may feel perfectly free to repeat it. Spanking can divert the child from feeling appropriate feelings of responsibility or guilt for his behavior and prevent him from taking action to solve the problem. These feelings (anger, humiliation) focus on the parent’s behavior (the hitting) rather than on the misbehavior, which led to the confrontation. The opportunity for learning is missed.
- A child who misbehaves and doesn’t get caught will often provoke a spanking (through some new misbehavior) to relieve her anxiety and guilt about having misbehaved. If we spank her, the slate is wiped clean in her mind, yet the original offense is not dealt with. This is a child who needs to be listened to and taught to solve problems directly.
- Finally, families need to establish, early on, a system of discipline that will work for all of childhood. Many parents who have relied on physical discipline feel helpless when a child reaches adolescence: “What can we do? We can’t spank our teenager any more!”

*There are numerous methods for teaching children appropriate behavior. Expand your repertoire by using some of these ideas and adding some of your own. No disciplinary tool is going to work every time with every child. Coping with children requires parent creativity! Indeed, parenting can be the most creative profession.*

Parents have found several specific teaching tools to be particularly effective in enhancing their relationships with their children, preventing misbehavior, and in promoting independence and problem-solving skills in their children. Practicing these skills can feel strange and awkward at first. However, with time, you will make them your own and feel quite natural when using them.

Linda Reilly is a social worker who has worked with families and children since 1973. She supervises social work students at Portland State University. Her eight-year-old son and four-year-old daughter keep her delighted, challenged, and humbled.

Original publication date: 07/05/1992 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon