

5 Discipline Traps to Avoid

Mistakes even smart moms make, and what to do instead

By Claire McCarthy, M.D. contributing editor; paediatrician and mom of five kids

Making mistakes is part of being a parent, and discipline is an area where we slip up constantly. It's one of our most daunting tasks, and to do it well we have to make clear, sensible, big-picture decisions at exactly the same moment when we are angry, frustrated, or embarrassed. And that's just as hard as it sounds.

After 17 years of being a mom and a paediatrician, I've been able to learn a lot about discipline from my own experiences, as well from other parents. While there are all sorts of possible blunders here are five biggies that most of us are guilty of -- and ways to avoid these common mistakes:

1. Thinking that One-Style-Fits-All

This one's not surprising: The bookstores are teeming with manuals, each touting an expert's best method. Friends and Grandma love to tell you what worked for them. And there is definitely something appealing about the simplicity of a one-approach-fits-all strategy. But some children freak out when you speak to them sharply, while others are unaffected. Some learn the first time you tell them something; others need so much repetition, you despair of their ever learning. Some listen right away; others need time to scream it out before you can talk to them.

And it's not just temperament; it's age and development. The job of a toddler is to push limits, to do crazy stuff that you've told him time and time again not to do. The job of a tween (roughly ages 8-14, who are "between" childhood and the teenage years) is to start asserting her independence from you, in sometimes obnoxious ways. And neither one is going to listen to a big lecture. A toddler is going to need simple, direct, quick discipline. A tween is most likely to respond to a punishment that removes her from her peers. But despite your best efforts, both the toddler and the tween are likely to keep doing the same "bad" thing for a while. Understanding where they are in life is key to picking the right approach to discipline, and preventing desperation (yours).

2. Over-doing it

My husband does this a lot. He has a way of getting in a bad mood when the kids are fresh (imagine that!), and he metes out punishments that are either more reflective of his mood than the crime or thoroughly unworkable, like saying "You have to stay in your room this afternoon" when he has errands to run and needs to bring the kids with him. The punishment should fit the crime, not your frustration level. And it needs to be something feasible, that doesn't overly affect siblings who've done nothing wrong.

A friend taught me a great trick. If one of the kids is doing something he shouldn't -- being mean to a sibling, for example -- I say, "There will be consequences." (It's particularly good to use in public, because while it may



strike fear into your kids, it sounds pretty benign.) Over the years, it's been shortened to "Consequences!" with the appropriate firm-but-not-yelling voice, furrowed brow, and I'm-totally-serious gaze.

If the misbehaving child doesn't stop, there are consequences, but I have a moment to think about them. Sometimes I'll ask, "What do you think your consequences should be?" It's interesting how often kids come up with a fair punishment (e.g., apologizing and letting the wronged sibling play with his favourite toy for the rest of the day).

3. Under-doing it

We've all been there. Little Jake is throwing sand at everybody within reach from the sandbox, and the responsible (I'm using the word loosely) grown-up is saying, distractedly, "You're going to get into trouble if you don't stop doing that." And little Jake keeps right on heaving sand because he clearly knows his mom isn't going to stop him.

Sometimes these types of kids are punished, but they're not bothered by it. "I take away his Game Boy, but he just plays with something else," their parents tell me in the office. Or they'll say, "I put her in time-out, but she just plays there." Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating harshness. But for a punishment to work well, I explain to parents, it needs to be something your child doesn't want to have happen again. In our house, taking away favourite toys (the length of time varies with the gravity of the offense), sending the kids to their rooms (our variation on a time-out), or losing screen time (computer and/or TV) generally works. So does "No play-dates for X period of time" and, for the teenagers, "You're grounded!" Of course, every family, and every child, is different. In the office, I try to help parents think about what would be most effective; for example, taking away play-dates might work for a social kid. Or if your child loves Dora, no TV/DVD for that day will get her attention.

4. Being Inconsistent

Once you've said no to something, like "No throwing sand," you have to continue saying no. You can't give in sometimes ("Well, okay, you're having fun and nobody seems to mind getting it in their eyes"). Kids get confused

and pick up quickly on the fact that they have, well, latitude. If you really enjoy throwing sand, and you know that sometimes Mommy and Daddy let you, of course you're going to throw sand.

Since you don't want to say no to everything, pick your battles and decide what's really important to you. In my case, I'm not so concerned about neatness, but I won't tolerate meanness, lying, or anything violent or dangerous. Once you've decided on your rules, set them clearly and stick to them.

The other part of this is follow-through. If you take away your child's TV privileges for the day and then give in while you're making dinner because you don't want him underfoot, he'll figure out pretty soon that there's a good chance he may not get punished if he decides to break the rules.

5. Always focusing on the negative

Sometimes I think we parents must sound like the grown-ups in the Charlie Brown specials, all "WahWahWah." And when you've got a kid who has trouble with rules, it can make for a really difficult relationship when all you seem to do is reprimand her.

The solution is to catch your child being good. If she goes a solid 15 minutes without picking on her sister, she should get kudos. Even if it's only five minutes, try your best to notice it. You'll be surprised how effective this

can be: It's human nature to like praise, and to want to please the people we love.

This can work for you in other ways, too. As you enter a store, instead of saying, "If you don't behave, I'll be really angry and won't get you a treat," try saying, "We have to get the shopping done, and I need help. If everyone is good and helps me, we'll stop for ice cream on the way home." Think about it: Which would you rather hear?

It's not a bad idea, actually, to ask yourself variations on that question often. What would you rather hear? How would this make you feel? Granted, you're a grown-up, and would probably need to be told only once not to bite. But asking yourself questions reminds you that your kids aren't just crazy beasts put on this earth to make you insane (although it feels that way sometimes) and that discipline isn't just about keeping order. Discipline is about keeping our children safe -- and helping them grow up to be kind, successful, happy adults.

So the next time your child is the one throwing sand in the sandbox, take a deep breath. As you scoop her up and think about what might work this time (since your last method didn't), remember that she is little and has so much yet to learn. And, most of all, remember that you love her. Because that, more than anything else, is what discipline is really about.

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