

The discipline tool kit: Successful strategies for every age

By Melanie Haiken

We've all seen them: the out-of-control toddler hurling handfuls of sand at the park, the whiny-voiced 3-year-old begging for candy in the grocery line, the sassy 7-year-old yelling "you can't make me!" at the restaurant. And we've privately dissed their parents, reassuring ourselves that *we'd* never be such a wimp if *our* child was terrorizing the playground or disrupting everyone's dinner.

But then it happens: the massive meltdown that takes you completely by surprise. And suddenly you *are* that parent — the one flailing to figure out what to do. The truth is, every child presents discipline challenges at every age, and it's up to us to figure out how to handle them.

Why is discipline such a big dilemma? Because it feels like a tightrope act. On one side there's the peril of permissiveness — no one wants to raise a brat. On the other side there's the fear of over-control — who wants to be the hardliner raising cowed, sullen kids?

What we need is a comfortable middle ground to ensure that our little ones grow up to be respectful, caring, and well behaved.

First, the ground rules

To set the stage for discipline success, here are the bottom-line rules many experts agree on:

1. We're all in this together. Right from the start, teach your kids that your family is a mutual support system, meaning that everyone pitches in. Even a baby can learn to "help" you lift her by reaching out her arms, says Madelyn Swift, founder and director of Childright and author of *Discipline for Life, Getting It Right With Children*.

2. Respect is mutual. One of the most common complaints parents and kids have about each other is "You're not listening." Set a good example early on: When your child tries to tell you something, stop what you're

doing, focus your attention, and listen. Later you can require the same courtesy from her.

3. Consistency is king. One good way to raise a child with emotional strength? Be consistent and unwavering about rules and chores, says Harvard professor Dan Kindlon, co-author of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*.

Even if you pick just one chore to insist on, your child will be better off, Kindlon says. "Being firm and consistent teaches your child that you care enough about him to expect responsible behavior."

4. Life's not always fair. We're often too afraid of disappointing or upsetting our kids, say some discipline pros. "If a child never experiences the pain of frustration — of having to share a toy or wait their turn in line — or if they're never sad or disappointed, they won't develop psychological skills that are crucial for their future happiness," says Kindlon.

The tools: Babies, toddlers, and up

A disclaimer: These tools aren't guaranteed to work every time, and none of them will be right for every parent and child. But they will give you options — and what parent doesn't need more to choose from in his or her personal bag of tricks?

Tool: Lavish love

Age: Birth to 12 months (and beyond!)

How it works: It's easy to wonder whether you're giving in when you pick your baby up for the umpteenth time. Is it time to start setting limits? Not yet, say the pros.

Responding to your baby's needs won't make her overly demanding or "spoiled." "It's impossible to spoil or overindulge a baby," says Kathryn Kvols, an expert who teaches parenting workshops on discipline and development. The opposite is true: By giving your child as much love and attention as possible now, you're helping her become a well-adjusted and well-behaved person. "Your baby is developing trust in her parents, and she does that by knowing that you'll be there to meet her needs," Kvols says.

That trust means that in the long run your child will feel more secure and less anxious, knowing that you take her wants and needs seriously. She'll have confidence in you later, when it's time to set boundaries and lay down rules, and understand that you love her even when you correct her.

Real-life application: Your 4-month-old is crying even though you nursed her a half-hour ago. Your mother-in-law says to let her cry it out. Wrong, say experts: By crying she's telling you she needs something, even if you don't know what it is. Try walking with her, nursing her again, or singing to her. She needs to know you'll be there for her, even if all that's wrong is that she wants to be held.

Tool: Remove and substitute

Age: 6 to 18 months

How it works: Like the rest of us, young children learn by doing. When your baby throws his bowl of peas off the highchair tray, it's because he's curious to see what will happen, not because he wants to upset you or mess up your clean kitchen floor.

That said, you don't have to stand by while your child does something you don't like. And you definitely don't want to stand by if your little one's grabbing for something dangerous.

Take the object away or physically move your baby away from it. Then give him a safe, less-messy or less-destructive alternative. "Substituting something else will prevent a meltdown," Kvals says.

Make sure you explain what you're doing to your child, even if he's too young to really understand. You're teaching a fundamental discipline lesson — that some behaviors aren't acceptable, and that you'll be redirecting him when necessary.

Real-life application: Your 8-month-old keeps grabbing your favorite necklace and chewing on the beads. Instead of letting him, or continuing to pull it out of his hands, unclasp the necklace and put it aside, explaining simply that your jewelry is not for chewing. Then hand your baby a teething ring or another chewable toy and say, "This is okay to chew on."

Tool: Emphasize the positive

Age: 12 months and up

How it works: This one's easy: Tell your child when you like how he's behaving, rather than speaking up only when he's doing something wrong. "It takes a bit of practice to get in the habit of rewarding good behavior rather than punishing bad, but it's more effective in the end," says Ruth Peters, a clinical psychologist in Clearwater, Florida, and author of *Don't Be Afraid to Discipline* and other books.

Real-life application: It's nap time, a potential battle zone with your sometimes resistant toddler. Head it off by praising even small steps: "It's so great that you stopped playing with your blocks when I asked you to. That means we have extra time and can read a story. If you lie down right away, we'll have even more time and can read two stories."

Keep praising each improvement he makes in his nap time routine, and make it worth his while with rewards such as stories or songs.

Tool: Ask for your child's help

Age: 12 months and up

How it works: Researchers know something parents may not: Kids come into the world programmed to be helpful and cooperative. All we have to do as parents is take advantage of this natural tendency.

"Kids are innately wired to want to cooperate," says Kathryn Kvols. "A lot of times we parents just don't notice this because we don't *expect* children to be helpful."

Get your child involved in daily tasks around the house so she learns that everybody works together. "I recommend that parents find things their children can do, whether it's washing vegetables, feeding the dog, or sorting laundry," Kvols says.

"You're teaching your child to be helpful, which is one of the most important life skills. We've found time and again that the people who are most mentally healthy are those who've learned to be of service to others." While this may not sound like a discipline strategy, just wait: If you've taught your child to be cooperative, you can call on this quality when you need it. For example, giving your toddler a "job" to do can defuse some of the most common tantrum-provoking situations.

Kathryn Kvols put this to use when her son, Tyler, refused to get into his car seat. She made him "boss of the seatbelts" — he had to make sure everyone in the car was buckled in before the driver could start the car. The battle over the car seat was over.

Real-life application: Let's take the grocery store aisle, site of infamous meltdowns. When your child wriggles to get out of the cart, you can hold up a box of raisins and say: "I need to get food for us to eat, and I need you to help me." Then hand him the box and let him drop it behind him into the cart.

You can also ask him to be your "lookout" and help you spot certain favorite foods on the shelf.

Tool: Right wrongs together

Age: 12 to 24 months

How it works: Going back to the peas example above, there's a difference between a baby who playfully throws her bowl to the floor and a young toddler who knows she's creating a mess for Mommy or Daddy to clean up.

That turning point happens when your child becomes capable of knowing when she's doing something she's not supposed to, often around her first birthday. "When she looks at you with that glint in her eye and then drops the peas, you know it's time to do something," says expert Madelyn Swift. What you do, says Swift, is start teaching the concept of taking responsibility for her actions.

Real-life application: Your toddler's made a mess under her highchair. When she's finished eating, lift her up, set her on the floor, and ask her to hand you some peas so she's "helping" you take care of it. Talk to her about what you're doing: "Okay, we made a mess with the peas so we have to clean it up."

Tool: Talk toddler-ese

Age: 12 to 24 months

How it works: The secret to getting your toddler to do what's right — or to stop doing what he shouldn't — can be as simple as communicating in a way he can truly understand. Pediatrician Harvey Karp, author of *The Happiest Toddler on the Block*, tells parents to get down to their toddler's level and keep it really, really simple.

Karp calls his communication strategy The Fast Food Rule because you're basically operating like a drive-through cashier: You repeat back the order, then name the price. Use short phrases with lots of repetition, gestures, and emotion to show your child that you get what's going on in his head.

Real-life application: Your toddler yanks a truck out of his friend's hands. Instead of plopping him down in a time-out or trying to explain why what he did was wrong — both strategies that assume your child's more sophisticated than he is — take a few minutes to echo what he seems to be thinking and feeling back to him: "You want the truck."

Validating your child's feelings will help him settle down, and once he's calm enough to listen, you can deliver your discipline message. But again, give him the stripped-down version: "No grab, no grab, it's Max's turn." Note: This may feel silly at first, but it will work.

Tool: Manage anger

Age: 12 to 36 months

How it works: Young children are tantrum-prone because they're not yet able to control their emotions, experts say. "Tantrums aren't really a

discipline issue, they're about anger management," says Madelyn Swift.

"Tantrums happen when kids don't get their way and they're *mad*."

Step one in this situation is to let your child calm down in whatever way works best for her. If she'll let you hold her, hug and rock her until she's quiet. If touching her only sets her off again, give her space to calm down by herself.

Don't try to talk to her about what happened until she's over the emotional storm, Swift says. But once it's over, don't let relief prevent you from addressing what happened. Instead, replay the tape and return to the scene of the crime: It's time to fix whatever mistakes were made.

Real-life application: Your toddler didn't want to get dressed and threw a fit, hurling toy cars around the room. Once she's stable, take her back to the toy cars and calmly but firmly tell her it's time to pick them up.

If the task seems too daunting, split it up. Point to one pile of cars and say, "You pick up these cars and I'll pick up the ones over there." Stay there until your toddler has finished her portion of the job.

If she refuses and has another tantrum, the cycle repeats itself. But wait longer for her to settle down this time, and make sure she knows you mean business. Then back to the cars you go.

Tool: Listen to "no"

Age: 12 to 36 months

How it works: "No" is one of the first words many kids learn to say, and it almost immediately becomes the one they say most often. As parents know, the constant negativity and refusals can get a little tiresome.

Strange as it may sound, one way to prevent "the endless no's" is to try and take "no" seriously when your child says it. After all, we all have a tendency to repeat ourselves when we don't think people are listening, right?

Real-life application: Your toddler's running around in a dirty diaper, but she refuses to stop and let you change it. "Start by asking if she wants her diaper changed, and if she says no, say okay and let it go for a while," says Kvals. Wait five minutes and ask again, and if you get another no, wait again.

Usually by the third time you ask, discomfort will have set in and you'll get a yes. And knowing that saying no carries some weight will stop your child from saying it automatically. "The more you respect their no, the less often they use it," Kvals says.

The tools: Preschoolers and up

Tool: Use time-outs *and* time-ins

Age: 2 years and up

How it works: The time-out is one of the best-known discipline tactics, but it's also controversial. Some experts think time-outs don't work well, are overused, and feel too punitive — especially for young preschoolers. "When we say 'Go to your room,' we're teaching them we're in control, when we really want them to learn to control themselves," says expert Kathryn Kvols. For some kids time-outs can be so upsetting that they trigger tantrums, something you want to prevent. To avoid this, treat time-outs as a brief cooling-off period for *both* of you. (One minute or less is probably long enough for a 2-year-old. Don't start using the one-minute-per-year guideline until your child's at least 3.)

Let your little one know that you need the time as much as he does by saying, "We're both really mad right now and we need to calm down." Designate an area of your house as a self-calming place for your child (preferably this won't be in your child's room, which should have only positive associations), and direct him to go there for a minute while you go to your own corner.

Another possibility: Take time-outs together by sitting down side by side. You can also balance the impact of time-outs by instituting "time-ins" — moments of big hugs, cuddles, and praise to celebrate occasions when your child behaves well.

Real-life application: You said no dessert tonight, triggering a tantrum, and now your child's screams for a cookie are only slightly louder than yours. Explain that it's not okay for either of you to scream at the other, so you both need to calm down. Lead her to her self-calming space (Kvols says the only thing that worked for her daughter was to go outside into the garden), and then sit down nearby yourself.

When the anger has subsided, explain that it's not okay to throw a fit to get what she wants and that you're sorry she's disappointed. (Hint: On a future night when a treat is okay, give her one and praise the fact that she's stopped fussing to get dessert.)

Tool: Try reverse rewards

Age: 3 to 8 years

How it works: Take a page from teachers everywhere: Kids respond much better to positive reinforcement than to reproach and punishment. And they also like structure and clear expectations.

Ruth Peters, the clinical psychologist in Clearwater, Florida, advises parents to take advantage of these qualities by setting up a system of rewards. You can make this system even more effective by reversing the usual rules: Instead of giving rewards for good behavior, take them away for bad behavior.

Real-life application: Put a few things your child loves — these could be a Hershey's kiss, a new colored pencil, and a card good for an extra bedtime story — in a jar or box as the day's rewards. Then draw three smiley faces on a piece of paper and tape it to the jar.

If your child breaks a rule or otherwise misbehaves, you cross out a smiley face and one treat disappears from the jar. An hour or so before bedtime, you give your child everything that remains.

The tools: Grade-schoolers

Tool: Teach consequences

Age: 5 years and up

How it works: We want our children to make the right choices — finish their homework *before* they turn on the TV, for example, or not play ball in the house. But when they don't, what do we do?

To handle problem behaviors, involve your child in finding a solution, says Harvard professor Dan Kindlon. For example, if he doesn't finish the night's homework, he may decide to wake up earlier the next morning to do it. Because this isn't a great long-term solution, make a plan for the future together: Does he want to do his homework before going out to play, or does he want to set aside time in the evening?

If he's been part of the planning process, it'll be a lot harder for your child to pretend he just "forgot." But be consistent in enforcing limits: If the plan is to finish homework after dinner, it must be finished before the TV goes on.

Real-life application: Your 7-year-old breaks a lamp throwing a ball in the house. Instead of scolding him by saying that he wasn't supposed to be doing this in the first place, tell him it's up to him to fix his mistake. Have him glue the lamp back together if he can — if not, he can do extra chores to earn enough for a new lamp.

Tool: Allow redo's

Age: 5 years and up

How it works: How many times have you wanted to take back something you said the moment you said it? Well, when your child sasses or snaps at you, and you snap right back, chances are everyone feels that way.

One way to maintain peace in the family is to allow "redo's" — a chance for your child (or you!) to say what she wants again in a more respectful way. "When you tell your child 'redo,' you're saying, 'I want to hear what you've said, it's important to me, but I want to be respected. So say it in a more respectful tone and I'm happy to listen,'" says Kathryn Kvols.

She and her daughter, Briana, even have a secret signal they use to tell each other to redo without having to say anything out loud. Asking for redo's when your child talks back keeps the situation from escalating. It also teaches her that speaking to people calmly is a better way to get the response she wants.

Real-life application: Your child screams "I hate you!" Stung and hurt, you immediately yell back, "Go to your room!" and the evening's lost.

Instead, take a deep breath and ask your child if she wants a "redo" (or use your signal if you're in public). This gives your child a chance to articulate her feelings in a calm way rather than just exploding.

"You want your child to know that you're not trying to shut her up, and that you're capable of hearing the good and the bad," says Kvols. "Then you can address the issue that's actually at stake" — the underlying problem that prompted a regrettable comment in the first place.

This article can be found online at:

https://www.babycenter.com/0_the-discipline-tool-kit-successful-strategies-for-every-age_1475318.bc