What's Appropriate Discipline?



No one would disagree with the statement that raising your children is not easy. Just when you think you have a handle on something, there is a change-in either them or you-and you are back to square one again. Then we put an extra spin on it, we ask you to take children who you have very little knowledge about and who have a difficult history. Now you question whether what you know is enough to stabilize this child without doing greater damage. Children in foster care need to be disciplined with patience, compassion, and consistency.

It is not unusual to find yourself parenting with some of the same techniques and phrases that your parents used. Then you attend the pre-service classes, and you start to wonder if those same techniques can or should be used. Any form of physical discipline is not permitted. The goal of discipline is to teach, not punish. It is not just about changing their behavior; discipline is about helping them to develop an internal means of regulation to manage their actions and emotions effectively. It is about learning how to communicate, solve problems, and explore the world in a way that is positive. Learning and accepting what a parent has to give starts with a trusting relationship. This is where it becomes tricky with children in care because, initially, they have absolutely no reason to trust you. Additionally, we do not want the discipline we use to trigger past trauma.

To begin, any discipline methods you use should be done with consideration to the child's age and stage of development. Children in care have experienced loss and trauma, which affects their levels of development. For example, children from birth to age three need constant supervision. They are just learning what the world is about. Without experiencing trauma, the world is exciting and stimulating. With trust, all you provide for them turns into learning experiences. So, a clear, firm voice or giving them distractions works to help them adjust behavior. However, having experienced trauma, either through neglect or abuse, the world is not a safe place, and excitement is replaced with fear. The desire to try new things is replaced with suspicion of what is going to happen next. Firm voices may be interpreted as the pre-cursor of pain. Redirection and distraction work if a child can trust that the person doing it is a safe person-and that takes time. It can be very helpful to understand what types of disciplinary measures the birth parents used. Some may have been appropriate and effective, and some may give you a good idea of where you need to start.

With any child placed with you, you need to go over the rules and expectations in your home. They can't be held responsible for breaking a rule if they don't know the rules, meaning that you cannot assume they should know whatever it is that works in your home. Be patient with explaining the expectations several times. You also need to remain clear and consistent about the consequences for not abiding by the house rules. Consistency builds trust.



Stress that there is a consequence for every decision they make, good or bad. Sometimes consequences are pleasant; completing homework results in an A. Sometimes consequences are not pleasant; having a tantrum results in spending time away from the group and the activity that is going on. Children need to know that they choose their consequences when they choose their behavior. Logical consequences work best when they are consistent, firm, and fair. This message is delivered calmly-after the situation has de-escalated.

Under that same consideration, keep the number of rules realistic. Too many rules can be overwhelming, so it is important to pick and choose which battles you feel are truly worth fighting.

Consequences for infants are simple-there are no consequences. They do not understand the relationship between action and consequences. The mission at this age is only to build trust. If they are crying, there is a reason and a need. By understanding the reason and satisfying the need, you are well on your way to establishing trust.

By the time the child is three, they are starting to put actions and consequences together. With them, changing your tone of voice may be enough to get their attention. Keep in mind, loud voices may be scary to them, and you may want to choose a soft, firm voice. You may want to employ a time out or time in. If they refuse to stay in one place, clear the room and ignore them. It is more important to break up the routine or pattern of behavior. Giving choices can also redirect behavior. For example, if they are refusing to leave an area, you can ask them if they want to put their coat on first or their shoes. Having choices gives them a sense of control, something they have very little of. From this point on, help them name their feelings so that they have a better understanding on how to manage them.



For preschoolers, ages four to five, you continue with the suggestions above, but you can add to your toolbox of ideas. Rather than putting the child in time out for fighting over a toy, place the toy in time out for a while. This age does well with imaginative things. This age also responds to counting-either up to three or to ten. The 1-2-3 Magic method is based on the child knowing the rules, and when they choose not to, they are given the count of three to make an adjustment. If they are kicking a wall, the parent responds calmly, "That's one." If they continue, "That's two." If they still continue, "That's three, let's take a time out." Because the use of "time out" may sound negative to a child, you may want to change it to, "That's three, take some time to reflect." Of course, if they are hitting another child, the parent's response goes immediately to three. At this age it is important to have the consequences follow the behavior as quickly as possible so they can begin to understand the cause and effect relationship. Use natural consequences when possible. For example, if a child breaks a toy, do not replace it. If they break a friend's toy, they need to replace it with one of theirs.

Once they are school age, the length of time used for consequences likely needs to be extended. Loss of privilege tends to be most effective at this time, particularly if electronics are involved. Because loss affects children in care more, remind them that they will get the privilege back the next day. Also be mindful that children or youth in care have a harder time parting with things. Be mindful of how long the item or privilege needs to be removed. Natural consequences can also be more effective. If they refuse to eat their dinner, they can wait until breakfast to eat. Keep their dinner in the refrigerator in case they change their mind.



By the teen years, you and they are struggling with multiple issues, most of which relate to puberty and a growing desire for friends and independence. Again, removal of privileges is effective. They are also at the age where they can be a part of the discipline process. When you are talking things out after an incident, get their feedback on what is going on and what needs to be done. What if you feel they are simply not listening to you? It is extremely frustrating to correct the same behavior over, and over, and over… The first thing to ask yourself is do they really hear you or are they distracted with some other issue? This is an important consideration for youth who have ADHD or who have a history of trauma. If you are correcting the same thing many times, it is past the time for discussion of how much they truly know about what you expect. Each child or youth has an individual way to process your expectations and their emotions; and you were not the person responsible for how that originally happened. You are picking this up mid-stream so to speak. The second question is to ask yourself how much time do you spend listening to them? Although it may not look like it, mutual respect is a big thing at this age. That respect has to start with you. Spend some time listening to what they have to say, even if it is not particularly important to you. If you want them to hear what is important to you, you need to hear what is important to them.

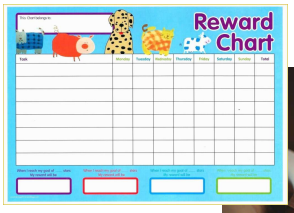


Regardless of age, talk things out after any incident happens, based on their age and ability to communicate. Try to recognize the things they tried to do right and look at options for what they could have done differently.

Keep the discipline in your home fair and consistent. If you respond differently to similar situations, it can be confusing.

If you have more than one child in the family, you will need to explain why the discipline may be different for different children, whether it is based on age, diagnosis, or degree of understanding. Be very mindful how "fair" is perceived when there is a combination of birth children, foster children, and even adoptive children in the home.

It cannot be a good discipline training if focusing on the good the child does is not emphasized. If you really believe that discipline is a teaching tool, then it makes perfect sense that reinforcing good behavior makes the job much easier. It is the consequence for good behavior. Interestingly, if you only pay attention to the negative behaviors, those are the ones you will reinforce. Make the praise specific to what is going on, but do not sabotage it. For example, saying, "You cleaned the living room without me asking-that's fantastic and it looks great! Why can't you do this more often?" If you think about it, stopping before asking the question will leave them with a much better feeling. The question kind of deflates the happy balloon.





Rewards for good behavior can inspire motivation. This can start at a young age and follow through to the teenage years. It all depends on what they want to work toward. Do not get stuck on finding material things for all rewards. For example, young children may work for extra story time-added bonus for you is that it helps them with their reading; the added bonus for them is staying up a little longer; and the added bonus for both of you is increased bonding. Rewards for good behavior can inspire motivation. This can start at a young age and follow through to the teenage years.

What if your child is very sensitive, the type of child who is fearful of failure? They may be more emotional or react more extremely to the prospect or the reality of not doing something right. This is often found in children in care because failure may have led to pain, either emotional or physical. And, unfortunately, failure can spiral feelings of depression and inadequacy. Highly sensitive children are also more prone to express rage. As a parent, you need to take a deep breath and think before you speak. Do not rush to either give in or become defensive. Instead, express empathy ("So it looks like you are very angry at me. Say to me exactly what you want to say." Or, "I know you want to go out with your friends tonight and it hurts not to do that. It's hard to remain calm when you want something this much.") Let them know that it is difficult for you, as a parent, to have to set the boundaries you are working with. Keep the directive gentle and firm, keep the communication open. You need to provide the framework that they need to understand that your job is to keep them safe and help them to make good decisions. The tone of voice that you use needs to be warm, sincere, calm, and sensitive. By far, this is the most difficult part of the process, just due to your own frustration. However, children react to our actions, reactions, words, tone, and affect. Keep in mind that you are the model and also keep in mind what it is that you are trying to achieve.

Parenting a child is hard work, and it does not always come naturally. Just like with your child, forgive yourself when you do not do the job as well as you would like. Just like with your child, most mistakes are just that, mistakes. Think about what you need to do differently, take a deep breath, and go at it again the next day.

Have faith in yourself; you can do this!

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What is Appropriate Discipline?

Complete and return this form to Whitney Kelly for 2 hours of training credit

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. The goal of discipline is to _____ not _____.

2. _____T _____F Any discipline methods you use should be done with consideration to the child's age and stage of development.

3. _____T _____F If you know what kind of discipline the birth parents used, you should always avoid it at all costs.

4. Too many rules can be _____, so pick and choose which battles you choose to fight.

5. Your infant reaches up and scratches your face, leaving marks. You meant to clip their fingernails. How do you correct this behavior?

_____
_____
_____
_____

6. While in the store, your four-year-old insists on taking their favorite cereal from the shelf. They scream when you put it back, and don't stop. What do you do?

_____
_____
_____
_____

7. Your ten-year-old will complete homework at home but refuses to turn it in when he gets to school. What is your strategy?

_____
_____
_____
_____

8. Your fifteen-year-old has ADHD. He has become a part of the football team, but he feels the coach is not being fair. He becomes disrespectful with the coach, and he repeats that behavior at home. What is your strategy?

_____
_____
_____
_____

9. If you only pay attention to the child's negative behavior, those are the ones you will _____.

10. _____T _____F There's no need to think about how you will discipline a child; when the time comes, it will come to you naturally.