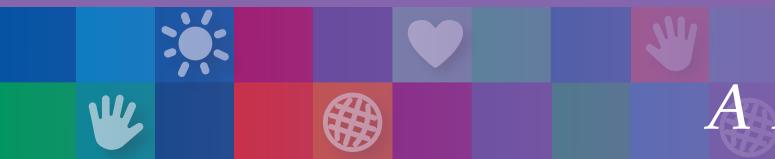




PATIENT EDUCATION

A horizontal decorative banner at the top of the page, consisting of a grid of colored squares (blue, red, purple, green) with white icons: a hand, a sun, a heart, a hand, a globe, and a hand. To the right of the banner, the title of the guide is displayed in a large, elegant, serif font.

*Encouraging Good Behavior in
Toddlers and Preschoolers:
A Practical Guide for Parents*

MAYO CLINIC CHILDREN'S CENTER

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a young child's face, focusing on the eyes and nose. The child has light-colored hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS
PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Mayo Clinic Children's Center

For more than 100 years, teams of physicians have cared for children at Mayo Clinic.

T. DENNY SANFORD PEDIATRIC CENTER MAYO EUGENIO LITTA CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Pediatric Sub-Specialties in the following areas:

Allergy and Immunology	General Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine	Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
Anesthesiology	Gynecology, Adolescent	Psychiatry and Psychology
Cardiology	Hematology and Oncology	Pulmonology
Cardiovascular Surgery	Infectious Diseases	Radiation Oncology
Child and Family Advocacy Program	Medical Genetics	Radiology
Community Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine	Neonatal Medicine	Regional (Health System) Pediatrics
Critical Care	Nephrology	Research
Dermatology	Neurology	Rheumatology
Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics	Neurosurgery	Sleep Medicine Center
Emergency Medicine	Ophthalmology	Speech Pathology
Endocrinology and Metabolism	Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery	Surgery
Gastroenterology and Hepatology	Orthopedic Surgery	Urology
	Otorhinolaryngology (ENT)	
	Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation	

Pediatric Specialty Clinics:

Adrenoleukodystrophy Clinic	Dana Child Developmental and Learning Disorders Program	Metabolic Bone Clinic
Aerodigestive Clinic	Dermatology Genetics Clinic	Mood Disorders Clinic
Anxiety Disorders Clinic and Intensive Therapy Program	Diabetes Clinic	Neonatal Follow-Up Clinic
Arrhythmia and Device Placement Clinic	Eating Disorders Clinic	Neuromuscular Clinic
Asthma Center	Eosinophilic Esophagitis Clinic	Pain Clinic
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD) Clinic	Epilepsy Clinic	Pain Rehabilitation Center
Bariatric Surgery Clinic	Erythromelalgia Clinic	Pediatric Diagnostic Referral Clinic
Brain Injury Program	Facial Paralysis and Reanimation Clinic	Pediatric Level 1 Trauma Center
Brain Tumor Clinic	Feeding Program	Plagiocephaly Program
Cerebral Palsy Clinic	Fertility Preservation	Pulmonary Hypertension Program
Chemotherapy/Radiation Long-Term Effects Clinic	Fetal Surgery Program	Renal Stone Clinic
Child and Adolescent Intensive Mood Program (CAIMP)	Friedreich's Ataxia Clinic	Spina Bifida Clinic
Childhood Sarcoma Clinic	Functional Movement	Spinal Deformities Clinic
ComPASS (Palliative Care and Integrative Medicine)	Disorder Program	Sports Medicine Center
Congenital Heart Clinic	Heart Failure Clinic	Thyroid Nodule/Cancer Clinic
Constraint Induced Movement Therapy Program	Hemophilia/Coagulopathy Clinic	Transgender Clinic
Craniofacial Clinic	Hyperlipidemia Program	Transitions Program
Cystic Fibrosis Center	Immunodeficiency Disorders Clinic	Transplant Center
	Inflammatory Bowel Disease Clinic	Travel Clinic
	Learning Disorders	Vascular Malformations
	Assessment Clinic	Velo-Pharyngeal Insufficiency Clinic
	Long QT Syndrome Clinic	Voiding Clinic
	Marfan Syndrome Clinic	Weight Management Clinic

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This information offers detailed steps that you may need to help your family and child make changes. We recommend that you take the time to review all of this information. The steps described here are best used together.

Can You Really Teach Your Child to Behave Better?

Parents* often ask whether it's possible to improve a child's long-term behavior problem. For most families, the answer is "Yes." But before you begin to try to change your child, remember this:

**Kids are supposed to "test the limits."
This begins in small ways at a very young age.**

What's happening as your child grows up?

It's hard to be a toddler. They want to do so much — and they want to do it all by themselves, right now. This is what they see you do every day. But they don't know that their little bodies and brains can't do what you do. Sometimes they get frustrated and they "act out."

It's important to remember that every moment of acting out isn't "misbehaving." It may be a developmentally correct way for your child to be a little independent. Here are some other common ways kids act.

- **Kids get frustrated.** Young children can't do everything they try to do. And they can't tell you about everything they need. So they get frustrated. But they can't explain why they are frustrated, so they act out. Afterward, they usually feel better because they released their stress and got some attention.
- **Some kids want or need attention.** Some children misbehave as a way to get attention. This may happen more often when they are tired, hungry, angry, or unhappy about issues in the house.
- **Kids see that misbehavior works.** Some children misbehave because they often get what they want after they misbehave.

* References to "parent" indicate any person acting like a parent for the child. This could include guardians, grandparents, teachers, and daycare providers.

Common developmental stages

Children grow so quickly during their younger years. Here is an overview of what usually happens during a child's typical early development stages.

- **Infants:** Infants need love, a quiet, calm home and soothing care. Their needs must be met before they begin to trust you. Also, it's okay if they cry a bit. It's okay if they lose their balance and "fall" onto the floor or "fall" back into a seated position as they try to sit up. You don't need to rescue them in those moments. And you don't want to use language like, "Oh, poor baby. I'll help you." You can simply, quickly help the child sit up if needed. You don't even have to say anything as you help the child for those few seconds.
- **Toddlers up to about age 3:** Toddlers are learning a lot of skills. They need a parent who understands their efforts at independence. They need positive verbal comments that support how they think now and what they are trying to do. This stage is all about having routines (eating, sleeping, reading, bathing) and keeping the child safe.
- **Preschoolers ages 3 to about 5:** During these years, children have a lot to learn about new rules, limits and boundaries. As you teach your child about all of this, you also help your child learn how to handle frustration. And the child will become a bit more independent as the months pass.

This stage feels different for both the kids and their parents. There will be many days or weeks when you need to remind the child about some rules. And neither of you will get immediate "rewards" for following all of the rules. The rewards come later. When the child follows the rules and doesn't misbehave, you can both feel good! **This stage sets the child's expectations for his or her later years.**

Follow a daily routine

One of the most helpful tips to share about life with younger children is this: It's very important to follow a routine — a pattern of activities that are done during certain events. For example, before a meal, you can tell the child to wash his or her hands and set the table.

Routines are often used for meals, bedtime, leaving the house, baths, car rides, and time in public places.

Be sure to model good behavior and explain what you're doing as you get ready. For example, say, "It's almost time to go. I'll get my shoes now." And later, "I want to be safe in the car. I'll buckle you in. And then I'll buckle myself in."

As your child learns the routines of your house, he or she will do some of these activities without reminders.

Give your child choices

As you teach your child a routine, give your child choices when possible. For example, "Now it's time to get dressed. Which shirt do you want to wear — a red shirt or a blue shirt?" The message is that the child needs to wear a shirt. And the child gets to feel independent as he or she makes the choice. This teaches your child to begin to think independently.

If you give your child options (which you choose), the child is more likely to do what you want. In this case, the child is more likely to get dressed when asked. Also, when you allow your child to make his or her own choice, the child will be less likely to complain or get angry ("throw a temper tantrum").

If the child refuses to do as you direct, there should be a consequence. One suggestion is that the child loses a reward. "If you don't put a shirt on, we can't go to the park after the doctor's office."

This stage in your child's life — when you set rules, give directions, have consequences and follow-through on the consequences — **will teach your child how to behave for years to come.**

How to Encourage Good Behavior

If you want to change your child's behavior, you need to:

- Change how you deal with your child. In other words, you need to change your own behavior.
- Have a lot of patience.
- Be willing to give extra time to this behavior goal.
- Remember that all of your effort will be well worth it. Your child will be better prepared to listen and obey for the rest of his or her life. And your family will have more peaceful days.



Behavior develops over time. It won't change overnight. And it may get worse before it gets better. You may have to adjust your plan over time. Typically, when parents are consistent with the plan shared here, some changes may happen within a few weeks. Some changes may take a couple of months.

Follow these 6 steps to encourage good behavior in your child:

1. **Spend special time** with your child, with no distractions. This is time when you focus on what your child wants to do.
2. **Look for times when you can praise your child for good behavior.** Doing this reinforces the good behavior. That makes a child want to do it again. Make it a simple message. Be sure to name the task as you praise it.

Examples: *"Wow, thank you for putting your toys away, Charlie."*

"You tried some of your green beans, AJ. Great job!"

"Thanks for coming inside when I asked you to, Azia."

3. **Look for times when you can give rewards.** Children naturally seek approval. When they show good behavior, reward them. See also "The Right Rewards."

Example: *"Zachary, you did a good job eating your beans. Let's read books now."*

As your child gets older, you can offer stickers, poker chips or points as praise for good behavior. These can be used to help your child earn rewards.

- When you see negative behavior, try to redirect or ignore. For young children, it often works to redirect or distract the child. If the behavior continues, decide whether you can ignore it. If it isn't harmful to your child, to other kids or to important property, you may be able to ignore it.

Example: *Finn grabbed some markers and asked if he could color at the kitchen table. His mother said no because it was almost time for dinner. So Finn had a temper tantrum. He fell to the floor, kicking and crying. His mother tried to distract him. With an excited voice, she said, "Sorry Finn. Right now, I really need a good helper to set the table and stir the salad. Would you be a big boy and help me with those important jobs?" Finn didn't answer his mother, so she repeated her request for help with an excited tone in her voice. She never mentioned coloring again; she focused on the new behavior goal. Finn did not get up to help his mother. So his mother decided to ignore him. She walked around him as she made dinner.*

- Give specific, positively worded directions. If redirection doesn't work or you can't ignore the behavior, tell your child what kind of behavior you expect. Make sure the expectations are right for your child's age and abilities. Ideally, most adults who give the child direction should have similar expectations and use similar rewards and consequences. Be consistent about your expectations every day.

Example: *"Charis, please finish eating your fruit."*

See also "How to Give Good Directions."

- Follow through with consequences. If your child doesn't do what you told him or her to do, or your child breaks a known house rule, such as "no yelling," it's time for a consequence.

Consequences help to stop behavior right away. And a memorable consequence may help your child decide never to do that behavior again. **Consequences include time-outs and loss of privileges.** Be strong. Don't "give in" when the child becomes frustrated or mad about the consequence.

Example: *Jamal asks for a treat. Dad says, "No, it's not time for a treat." Jamal drops to the floor, screams and kicks Dad out of anger. Dad knew then that they had two problems: a temper tantrum and an intentional kick.*

If the only negative behavior had been a temper tantrum, Dad would have said, "Jamal, if you want to play outside after dinner, you need to get up from the floor now." If Jamal had continued to disobey, Dad would have followed through with the consequence, and Jamal would not have gone outside after dinner.

Because Jamal kicked his father on purpose, Dad said, "Jamal, you kicked Daddy, and that hurt me. This makes me very sad. We do not kick our family or our friends, and you know that. You need to go to a time-out now."

See also "Temper Tantrums." For information about time-outs, see "The Right Consequences."

If you aren't sure what expectations, rewards and consequences are right for your child's age and abilities, talk to your family physician, child psychologist or a therapist.

All children need consistent expectations

If other children are in the family, expectations, rewards, and consequences must be used fairly and consistently for everyone. Remember to use expectations, rewards, and consequences that are right for your child's age and developmental abilities.

Tell other adults about consequences given

After you give your child a consequence, be sure to tell any other adults **who need to know**. This may include another parent or partner, grandparents, a daycare provider, and sometimes a teacher. Explain the consequence and ask them to enforce it if needed.

Example: *If the consequence is two days with no time on a computer or electronic device, then your child should not be allowed to use the neighbor's computer either. So when your child tells you that he's going to play next door, you should call the parent next door. Tell him or her about the consequence and ask the parent to enforce the consequence there too. If the parent doesn't want to do this, the kids should play at your home, so you can enforce the consequence. Another option is for the kids to wait until after the consequence is over before they play together.*

Temper Tantrums

Some children get so frustrated that they scream, kick, hit, and so on. This is called a temper tantrum. When your child has a temper tantrum, the goal is to calm your child.

- Stay calm and stay in control. Do not threaten to punish your child.
- Speak in a low voice. Use a whisper if that helps.
- Offer your child a tissue or glass of water. This distraction may be enough to stop the tantrum.
- If your child is reacting to something you did, do not change the rules. An example of this is to remind your child that it's bedtime. "No, it's not okay to stay awake another hour to play. It's bedtime. Go to the bathroom now, please." Do not give in to your child's demands as a way to make him or her stop crying.
- If your child does not calm down and stop the temper tantrum, get busy with an activity of your own. Ignore your child's poor behavior. Tell your child that you will do something fun together when the negative behavior stops.
- Remember: your child will watch your face to see how you react. So don't worry about what other people may think about how you handle the temper tantrum. If you look calm and speak calmly, the tantrum is likely to stop sooner. After a few times of doing this, your child will likely stop any tantrum much more quickly.

What If Your Child Refuses to Obey You?

Sometimes young children refuse to obey, or cooperate, no matter what you do. It may be a quiet refusal or a temper tantrum. No matter what it is, in these moments especially, you have to be “the boss.” There will be times when you may be embarrassed or inconvenienced because you have to stop what you’re doing to teach your child how to behave. Those can be some of the BEST learning moments for your child. Here are some examples.

Ava is acting out

Ava is not acting like an angel when she screams and tries to get away from you in the parking lot or in the grocery store. Distraction doesn’t work. Reminding her that she is supposed to go to the park after you get home doesn’t work. So do you try to get the rest of the groceries quickly, pay for them and race home to give her the consequence?

Ideally, no. You turn around in the parking lot and calmly go back to the car. You buckle her up and go home. Or you take the screaming child and the cart full of food to the check out. You say very simply, “I’m so sorry, but I have to leave right now to take care of my child. There are milk and eggs in here. If someone would put those back, I’d appreciate it. You can leave the rest in the cart here. I will be back for it as soon as possible this afternoon.” Then you either find a babysitter to watch the kids, or you go back with the kids after Ava is calm. Either way, Ava does not go to the park.

No dinner for Jimmy

You tell Jimmy that he needs to come to the table for dinner. He refuses and has a tantrum. You tell him that if he does not eat now, there will be no snack later. Jimmy agrees to sit at the table, but he refuses to eat. That’s fine. Include him in the dinner conversation as usual. Later, he says he’s “starving.” What do you do?

As the boss, you can offer Jimmy two choices: He can eat the same meal that he ignored earlier (served warm or cold as needed). Or he may have no food at all. Yes, this sounds a bit mean. But if a child has easy access to hydration (water or milk), and he or she is a healthy child, missing one meal will not cause much of a negative effect on a child’s health. The child needs to learn to obey you.

Party time is no fun

You've been looking forward to seeing your best friends and their new pool. There's just one problem: your youngest, age 4, is running near the edge of the pool. She knows the rules. This is a big safety concern. You called out to tell her not to run. She obeyed for 5 minutes. Then you walked over and told her very calmly that she'll have a time-out if she disobeys again. After a few minutes, she's running around. She had the time-out. Then she disobeys again. You've only been at their house for 45 minutes. Do you give another time-out? Or do you go home?

This is a safety issue; you go home now. You quickly apologize to your friends then walk over to pick up your child. She sits next to you while you pack up your stuff. Within about 5 minutes, you're carrying your child to the car. Your friend is carrying your towels and bags. You say good-bye and add, "I do hope we'll be able to stay longer next time." Do not make negative comments about your child's behavior to your friends. Do not show anger or frustration toward your child. At home, your daughter goes into a time-out again.

This example shows two consequences: time out and loss of privilege.
See also "The Right Consequences."

Parenting is tough

Teaching kids how to obey and how to act is hard. And sometimes it happens with really bad timing. But the good news is that your child probably won't forget these moments for a long time. Each of these kinds of moments teaches kids that you are serious when you tell them how to behave. And you're serious when you tell them about consequences. **When they believe you're serious, they'll be more likely to obey you the first time you tell them to do something.**

Note: There's no reason to talk about today's event tomorrow. But if your child brings it up, answer any questions he or she has in a calm way. Look for any reason to praise the child. It's even okay to praise your child for doing a good job during the consequence. For example, "I agree. I was sorry to leave the pool party too. But I like it that you stayed in your time-out so well. Now, do you want jelly or peanut butter on your toast this morning?"

Do You Share Parenting Responsibilities?

Some parents are divorced; some never married. And some people divide parenting time because they work alternate or rotating shifts.

If you share parenting responsibilities with another adult, it is very important that you and the other person talk about how you want to parent. Decide together on the expectations, rewards and consequences that both of you will use. Avoid giving conflicting messages or using different rules.

Here are some tips about how to have this conversation with the other parent.

- Most successful conversations start when you agree on something.
- Your child will not love you more if you give him or her more toys and treats than the other parent.
- The quality time you spend with your child is much more important and cherished than toys. This is true even though the child seems so happy to have the toys, electronics, treats, and so forth.

Examples:

- "We both want Nevaeh to grow up to be a happy and well-behaved child. What types of rules can we agree on that will help all of us reach that goal?"
- "We agree that the kids will go to bed at 8 p.m. in their own beds. As part of bedtime ritual, they each have to give their electronics (cell phone, iPad™ and so forth) to the parent and take a bath or shower."
- "When Nevaeh refuses to eat dinner, we agree that we will not give her any snacks or special treats later in the evening."

If you have a disagreement in front of the child(ren), each parent should excuse him- or herself and leave the room to talk quietly together. Return to the room when you are ready to present and support a decision that you agree on.

Special Time Together: A Foundation for Change

Every child needs to spend one-on-one time with his or her parent(s). But sometimes other tasks limit the time you have to interact with your child. Without realizing it, a child may try to get attention by acting out. To the child, negative attention seems better than not getting enough attention.

It is important that you work to have a good relationship with your child. This tells your child how special she or he is to you. And it will help your child improve his or her behavior.

Make a plan

- **Decide when you will spend time together.** It should be uninterrupted, one-on-one time. Aim for 10 to 15 minutes every day.

Examples: *Eat meals together or read together every day after dinner.*

- **Talk to your child about options for your time together.** Let your child take the lead if possible. But avoid activities that are aggressive, competitive, frustrating, or messy. Do activities that allow you to be together in a relaxed and happy manner.

Examples: *Read together, kick a ball around the yard, play with building blocks, or play with stuffed animals or a dollhouse. Color or create art projects or “camp” under a blanket tent.*

- **Make a commitment to this time.** Use a calendar your child can see. As much as possible, don't let other events affect your time together. When this time is part of your routine, it helps both you and your child.

Some tips for your time together

- Enjoy yourself. Take time to notice and think about how amazing your child is.
- You should have no other commitments except to enjoy your child. Don't allow video games or interruptions of people, phone calls or email.
- Describe your child's good behavior and praise it. For example, “Miguel, I really like how much fun you're having with the character's voices. It makes reading time with you really special.”
- Don't give commands, corrections or directions.
- Ignore bad behavior. If the child's behavior becomes disruptive (such as yelling or breaking toys), warn the child once to stop the behavior. If he or she continues to act out, stop the special time and tell your child why. For example, say, “I'm going back to the kitchen now because you are breaking the toys.” No other explanation is needed. When the next special time is scheduled, don't bring up past negative behavior.

This special time should be separate from the reward system. As described in "Social and Family Rewards," additional time may be used as a reward.

Are you a busy parent?

Sometimes it's hard to find time to spend with your child. Here are some suggestions from other parents.

- Ask your child to help you make dinner.
- Involve your child in special tasks, such as putting stamps on envelopes when you're doing a volunteer mailing project.
- Ask your child to help you think of healthy things to put on your grocery list.
- Leave work an hour or two early once in a while. Spend special time with your child. Pick him or her up from school, if possible.
- Take a photo (a selfie) when you two are doing something fun together. Print that out and leave it for your child to find. Add a quick note with it, like, "Such a fun time baking! Jaden and Mom." Remember to add the date, too.

Here's another fun idea: Write short notes and put them in your child's coat pocket or lunch bag.

If you have more than one child, try this:

- Start your day by waking one child and spending a few minutes with him or her.
- End your day with another child. Spend a few minutes with him or her before bedtime.
- Rotate your time as needed so you have a few minutes with each child on a regular basis.

How to Give Good Directions

Kids need to know what you expect from them. When you explain your expectations in a way the child understands, and the expectations fit the child's age and development, you make it easier for your child to cooperate.

- **Have good body language:**
 - Be physically close so you can have a normal conversation.
 - Bend down or get on your knees so your face is level with your child's face.
 - Have good eye contact.
 - Have a pleasant look on your face and a relaxed body.
- **Avoid distractions.** Turn off the phones, TV and any mobile devices.
- **Get your child's attention.** Make sure your child is listening. Use your child's name or a term of affection, such as "Dear."
- **Give simple, positively worded directions, one at a time.** Be polite and speak loudly enough to be heard. If you are frustrated, don't show it. Use positive, not negative, words. For example, say, "Sit still" because it tells your child what to DO. Avoid saying, "Don't get out of that chair." That is negative language. It tells the child what NOT to do.

Be specific. Tell your child exactly what to do in a short message. Typically, the younger the child is, the shorter the directions should be.

Example: *"Miguel, please sit still." If needed, have the child repeat the instructions to avoid confusion. When Miguel is still, say, "Thank you. You're doing great at sitting still."*



- **Don't mention the consequences the first time you give directions.** Focus on the positive aspects of the request and the behavior you want. Don't mention the consequences.

Example: *"Bobby, be a good helper, please. Put your shoes in the front closet."*

- **Follow through.** Use a time that's right for your child's age. A young child can't sit still for 5 minutes. Try 2 minutes. And remember: 2 minutes is only 2 minutes.
- **Don't argue or explain.** If you repeat the direction over and over or debate with the child about why he or she should listen, the child will be less likely to cooperate.
- **Show the child how to do a task, if needed.** Young children learn a lot every day. Sometimes they remember what they learned last week, and sometimes they don't. When you give directions for a chore, you may need to show the child how to do it. Pick up a few toys to show your child how and where to put them.
- **If you have to repeat directions once,** include information about the consequence. Be specific. For example, say, "Tommy, if you want to play with the train set, first you need to pick up your blocks." Or simply, "Pick up first, then more play time." Avoid saying, "Tommy, you can't play with the train set unless you pick up your blocks."

- **Give an immediate reaction.** Only give directions when you are available to watch how your child reacts. If the task is done correctly, smile and give praise right away. For example, smile and say, "Thank you for waiting." Or, "I really like how you cleaned up your toys so quickly, Kendis."
- **If the child doesn't cooperate, give a time-out or a different consequence.**

Avoid giving these directions

- **Avoid giving directions that are questions.** If you are giving a direction that is reasonable and you expect it to be followed, don't give your child a chance to say, "No." For example, don't say, "Tommy, would you hang up your coat?" If the child says, "No," or you have to repeat the directions, both you and the child likely will be frustrated.
- **Avoid giving directions that aren't clear.** If your child is not sure what to do, the confusion may lead to poor behavior. For example, "Behave" doesn't tell a child exactly what to do. Instead say, "Ellery, please stay in your seat."
- **Avoid giving directions with an explanation.** If you must explain a direction, offer that information first. You want your child's direction to be the last thing he or she hears before taking action.

Example: "Zeke, we need to go to the store. Please go to the bathroom then put on your shoes."

Example of how to give directions

1. **Give specific, positively worded directions.** For example, "Catherine, stay in your seat and eat your green beans."
 - a. If the child cooperates, praise him or her. For example, say, "Thank you, dear. Please eat all of your beans."
 - b. If the child does not cooperate...
2. **Tell the child about the consequence using positive language. Then repeat the direction.** For example, say, "Catherine, if you want dessert tonight, you need to eat your green beans. Please eat your beans now."
 - a. If the child cooperates, praise him or her.
 - b. If the child does not cooperate...
3. **Follow-through with the consequence.** In this case, no dessert.

See also "What If Your Child Refuses to Obey You?"

The Right Rewards

Rewarding positive behavior typically is a more effective teaching tool than punishing negative behavior. **To change a child's behavior, you should feel as though most of your time is spent rewarding good behavior.**

The first step to improving a child's behavior is to recognize and reward appropriate behavior. The types of rewards used to change a child's behavior fall into two categories:

1. **Social and family rewards:** Typically, these rewards are a parent's time and attention.
2. **Structured-system rewards:** Typically, these systems use points, stickers or tokens to reward good behavior. When the child has earned enough points or tokens, he or she can exchange them for activities, privileges, treats, or prizes.

When you use a reward system

- **Talk with your child** to decide what reward(s) or activities he or she enjoys. This will increase his or her motivation to cooperate.
- **Give praise and smaller rewards more often**, instead of a larger reward less often. Children lose motivation when a large reward takes a long time to be earned.
- **Reward and praise right away.** Ideally, you want to give a reward as quickly as possible after the positive behavior. Doing this helps the child's brain make a stronger connection between the behavior and the reward. If you need to delay the reward slightly, when you do give it, remind your child about the behavior that earned the reward.
- **Make the reward appropriate and meaningful.** There are many options for rewards. (See "Social and Family Rewards" and "Structured-System Rewards.") Choose the best one for each child. Be prepared to update the rewards as your child ages or if he or she loses interest in the current reward system.
- **Be specific when telling your child about the reward.** Telling your child why he or she is getting the reward is an important part of a reward system.

Example: *"Tommy, because you put your clothes in the hamper before your bath, you may pick out a second book to read before bedtime."*

Social and Family Rewards

Physical rewards: Hugs and kisses

Expressing physical and emotional warmth through hugs, kisses and pats on the back are great ways to tell your child how happy you are with his or her behavior. The message is easy for children to understand quickly. Young children, especially, respond well to such displays of affection.

Verbal rewards: Praise

Praise is a very useful reward. And it is important to the development of your child's self-esteem. Be sure to watch for positive behavior or patterns of behavior change that you can praise.

Example: *"David, thank you for picking up your toys. Now I won't step on them and hurt my feet."*

Those two simple sentences praised three of David's efforts: noticing a problem, making a decision to fix the problem and taking action (cleaning). In addition, when the parent explains how David's effort helped the parent, it gave David a little lesson about the value of helping other people.

Note: Any genuine praise you give is appreciated, even a simple, "Thanks for helping, David." It demonstrates to your child that you notice his or her positive behavior.

Activity rewards: Special time together

In addition to the usual one-on-one special time you spend with your child, many children respond positively to extra time with parents as a reward for good behavior.

Be sure to make arrangements for any other children in the family to be cared for during this time.

Structured-System Rewards

Sticker chart

For children who are pre-kindergarten age through early elementary school years, a sticker chart can be a very effective tool.

- Work with your child to identify which behaviors to reward.
- Make a chart using words or pictures to explain what is expected.
- Add a sticker for each behavior done correctly and offer praise as described in "Social and Family Rewards."
- Use the chart and talk about your child's progress in a positive way at the end of the day.

Example: *"Finn, I'm so proud of you for not being fussy or crabby when we left for daycare today. It is so nice when you are a happy boy in the morning. You earned a sticker for this morning. I want to give you a big hug for that."*

- Set a goal, such as 10 stickers, and work with your child to decide on a reward he or she can receive after meeting that goal.

The Right Consequences

Over time, the positive action of rewarding good behavior typically leads to fewer moments of misbehavior. However, **most often, behavior will get worse for a while before it gets better.** Again, this is a natural reaction for kids. They test limits. But they need consequences when they misbehave.

No physical consequences

Do not spank or use other types of physical consequences.

Build a positive foundation

Before consequences can be effective, your child must have a positive relationship with you. (See "Special Time Together: A Foundation for Change.") Work to maintain that relationship on a daily basis.

To build a positive foundation:

- Pay attention to good behavior.
- Have regularly scheduled special time.
- Reward good behavior.

Teach responsibility by using consequences

Use one of the following consequences. Each option can help your child learn that negative behavior ends in negative results. These consequences can also teach your child that he or she has the responsibility to make good decisions.

- Ignore
- Logical consequences, such as loss of a privilege
- Time-out

Ignore

If a child's behavior isn't dangerous or disruptive to others, ignore it. For example, ignore whining. When you choose to ignore a certain behavior, it may seem like you're not "doing your job" to stop that behavior. Actually, you are. You gain more by focusing on positive behavior. **For the best results, pay attention to and praise good behavior and ignore most (but not all) bad behavior.**

To ignore behavior, don't look at or talk to your child. Read a book or leave the room, if needed.

Remember:

- **Be prepared for the behavior to get worse before it gets better.** Children don't like to be ignored. The bad behavior could continue for as long as a few days.
- Stay strong and continue to ignore — while watching for opportunities to praise good behavior. If the child sees you continuing to ignore a behavior, over time he or she should give up.
- Be prepared for the behavior to happen again once in a while. Ignore it then, too.
- Have patience. The behavior will change if you continue to ignore the behavior as needed.

Ignoring only works when...

Ignoring the child only works when the behavior is done solely to get your attention. There is nothing else for the child to "gain" — no other reason for the child to act that way.

When the behavior has a reward, it should not be ignored. Here are some examples of behaviors you should not ignore.

- When a child takes a cookie, the reward is eating the cookie.
- When a child does not obey you after you say that it's time to leave, the reward is that the child continues to play.

In these situations, choose logical consequences instead.

Logical consequences

Around age 5, a typical child probably is ready to accept greater consequences. Aim to use a logical consequence, such as loss of a privilege. This type of consequence closely connects the misbehavior and the punishment.

When a child loses a privilege, he or she no longer gets to do an activity or have an object he or she enjoys. For example, when your child doesn't clean up his or her toys, take the toys away. A reasonable consequence is to lose a toy for a day or two or to lose one playdate or one trip to the park. A longer consequence typically is not needed.

How to apply a logical consequence

- Decide on a logical consequence for the misbehavior and tell the child. If the child often misbehaves, tell him or her in advance what punishment will be given for the misbehavior.
- If the child continues to misbehave after hearing the consequence, calmly follow through with the punishment.
- If the child complains, do not explain or argue. And do not remove the consequence.
- If the child refuses to obey the consequence, use a time-out.

Some consequences work and some don't. Be consistent.

Use these behavior expectations in most areas of the child's life, especially if the child is acting out in other places (preschool, daycare, church, and so forth). Having similar expectations throughout the day typically leads to faster behavior change.

Be ready to try something new, if needed.

As the child gets older, this logical consequence may continue to work well. As needed, ask your health care provider for other ideas.

Time-out

For children ages 2 to 12 years, time-outs usually work well to break a cycle of misbehavior. Time-out is supposed to be time away from any situation that encourages a child to act out.

Note: A child may act out in order to get quiet time for him- or herself. Stop now to consider whether your child has enough quiet time alone. Also, do you have other positive efforts in place — special time, praise and other rewards? **If the child doesn't have a reward structure in place to balance the time-outs, time-outs won't work as well.**

Location for time-outs

Typically, an ideal location is where the child can be supervised and where he or she can't participate in the family's activities or entertain him- or herself. A stairway or hallway often is a good option.

- Away from windows, toys, people, and anything that can be damaged (books, wallpaper, and so forth).
- Not a bedroom, preferably.
- Not a frightening place for the child, such as the basement or a dark corner.

Behavior that earns a time-out

- If your child does something dangerous or breaks a known safety rule, immediately and calmly direct your child to a time-out.
- Examples of this kind of behavior are biting, kicking and throwing food at mealtime.
- For typical misbehavior, including failing to follow directions, give one warning. Then allow 5 to 10 seconds for the child to respond. If there's no response, direct the child to a time-out.

Time-outs should not be used for any other negative behavior, such as not doing daily chores. For those behaviors, use a logical consequence.

Example of how to do a time-out

1. When your child misbehaves or doesn't follow directions, tell him or her what to do then wait 5 to 10 seconds for your child to respond.
2. If he or she doesn't respond correctly, **immediately and calmly say one time only**, "Because you did (name the behavior), you have to have a time-out." Do not repeat the time-out direction or explain it further. Ignore shouting, crying and promises to correct or avoid the behavior in the future.
3. If the child refuses to go voluntarily to the time-out, calmly lead him or her by the hand or carry the child if necessary. **Be careful not to show any frustration or anger you may feel.**
4. Tell your child to sit down, be quiet and ignore any people or objects that may be nearby. After the child is seated, quickly walk away without saying anything else.
5. **Time the punishment using the child's age: one minute in time-out for each year of age.** If he or she cried, yelled or acted out during the time-out, the clock "stops." The rest of the time-out continues after the child is quiet for a few seconds. There must be at least 20 seconds of quiet before the time-out should end. Before the child leaves the time-out, the child must agree that he or she will do whatever task the child refused to do before the time-out.

When the time-out ends, if your child stays in that space for any reason, ignore it. The child may be thinking about his or her behavior and the punishment. He or she will probably get up soon.

6. **When the time-out is over, the child needs to correct the behavior that resulted in the time-out.** For example, if the toys weren't picked up, they need to be picked up right after the time-out ends. If that doesn't happen, give another time-out.
7. When your child cooperates and corrects the misbehavior, offer a simple acknowledgment. **Do not praise the child.** For example, say, "I'm glad you chose to do what I asked you to do."

What to do if your child doesn't stay in a time-out

Warn your child that he or she must stay in the time-out or you will send him or her to a back-up location to calm down. (The back-up location should be a room where the child will be safe — and bored.) After he or she has been quiet for 30 seconds in the back-up location, the original time-out must be finished.

Sometimes you may need to hold or secure your child until he or she can calm down. This hold is like a hug that keeps the child in your arms. It's not like a wrestling move. The child should be in a position where she or he can breathe easily. Try to keep yourself calm while you do this.

If your child will not stay in a time-out, call your child's health care provider's office on the next business day to ask about other options you can try.

Final Thoughts

Developing a behavior-change plan is a great way to improve your relationship with your child. It can even help improve your child's relationships with other people.

It will take time, patience and great consistency by you and other adults who are involved in the plan. The rewards may be equally great — for your lives today and your child's future.

If you continue to have concerns about your child's behavior after you try to use this information, or if you have any other questions, contact your child's health care provider. It may be helpful to meet with a child psychologist or therapist. Those specialists can help you learn more about how to use behavior methods.



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Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal Mayo Clinic patient of more than 40 years and a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family's activities in oil, gas and ranching. Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.

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