



PATIENT EDUCATION

*Encouraging Good Behavior in  
Older Children and Teens:  
A Practical Guide for Parents*



MAYO CLINIC CHILDREN'S CENTER



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:*

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

#### *Pediatric Specialty Clinics:*

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

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## How to use this information

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" as they become more independent.**

## What's happening as your child grows up?

Around the time your child turns 5 and for all of the years after that, the relationship is likely to feel different — for both you and your child. There will be many times when you need to remind your child about some rules. And neither of you will get an immediate "reward" for all of those efforts. The rewards come later, when the child follows the rules and doesn't misbehave.

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.
- **Kids may not know the rules.** Some children aren't misbehaving at all. The "rules" of behavior change as a person ages. Your child may not realize a behavior is wrong or may not know how to change it. Direction given to the child last year may not be age- or developmentally appropriate now. Also, kids don't always "watch and learn" as you follow the rules. You need to tell them when your expectations change.

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

**Did you do “something wrong”?**

Some parents wonder whether they are to blame when their child misbehaves. It's important to remember that parenting is hard work! After learning about the behavior-change methods explained here, many parents decide to change how they respond to their children. This isn't because they “caused” their child to misbehave. It's because parents typically are powerful people in their children's lives. And they are usually in the best position to help their children improve their behaviors.

# 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 5 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. This is not the same time you may use as an activity reward. See "Special Time Together: A Foundation for Change."
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:** *"Thanks for moving your books off the dinner table, Charlie."*

*"You ate your green beans, AJ. Good job!"*

*"Thanks for coming home on time, as we agreed to, Azia."*

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

**Example:** *"Thank you, Miguel. You did a good job on your homework. Want to play some basketball together now?"*

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

4. **Give specific, positively worded directions.** 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.

**Examples:** *"Katarina, don't throw the pieces for that toy across the room."  
"Jarrod, please do your chores before lunch."*

See also "How to Give Good Directions."

5. **Follow through with consequences.** If your child doesn't do what you told him or her to do, or your child broke a known house rule, such as "no yelling," it's time for a consequence. Consequences discourage your child from behaving that way 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:** *If a child repeatedly leaves his or her clothes on the floor, take away a favorite piece of clothing. (The timeframe for the consequence depends on the child's age.)*

See also "The Right Consequences."

If you aren't sure what expectations, rewards and consequences are reasonable for your child, talk to your family physician, child psychologist or a therapist. See also "The Right Consequences."

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.**

### **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 babysitter, and sometimes a teacher. Explain the consequence and ask them to enforce it, if needed.

**Example:** *If the consequence is no car for a week, your child is not allowed to drive a friend's car either. So if your child tells you about plans to drive a friend's car to the football game the next day, you should say, "No driving means no driving at all." If needed, call the friend's parent. Tell him or her about the consequence. Ask the parent to tell his or her child not to loan the car to your child.*

# Special Time Together: A Foundation for Change

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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, read or go for a walk together every day after dinner.*

- **Talk to your child about options for your time together.** Let your child take the lead if possible. But guide the decisions toward activities that are cooperative and constructive. Avoid activities that are aggressive, competitive, frustrating, or messy. Do activities that allow you to be relaxed and happy together.

**Examples:** *Do a puzzle, play cards or catch, kick a ball around the yard, go for a walk, sit and talk, do a hobby you can share. Play with building blocks, play with stuffed animals or a dollhouse, color, create an art or building project, or "camp" under a blanket tent.*

- **Make a commitment to this time.** Use a calendar or other tool to help. 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.
- Let your child lead the activity, don't give commands, corrections or directions.
- Describe and praise your child's good behavior. For example, "Miguel, I really like how you're concentrating, taking turns and staying calm. It makes reading time really special with you."
- 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, "Special time is over because you are breaking the toys. We will try again tomorrow." 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, if needed, 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:** "Jamal, please sit still." *If needed, have the child repeat the instructions to avoid confusion. When Jamal is still, say, "Thank you. You are 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 backpack near the front door."
- **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 the task, if needed.** Kids 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, such as loading a dishwasher, you may need to show the child how to do it.

- **If you have to repeat directions once**, include information about the consequence. Be specific. For example, say, “Tommy, **if you want to go outside**, first you need to clean your room.” Avoid saying, “Tommy, **you can’t play** outside unless you clean your room.”
- **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 your room 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, “Oliver, sit still and wait quietly for 5 minutes.”
- **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, sit still.”
  - a. If the child cooperates, praise him or her. For example, say, “Thank you, dear. Please sit still for 5 minutes.”
  - 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 to watch a movie tonight, you need to sit still. Please sit still.”
  - a. If the child cooperates, praise him or her. For example, say, “Thank you, dear. Please sit still for 5 minutes.”
  - b. If the child does not cooperate...
3. **Follow-through with the consequence.** In this case, no movie until the child sits still for 5 minutes.

# 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. Helping to make this decision will increase your child's motivation to cooperate. Be prepared to repeat this conversation as your child ages and his or her interests change.
- **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 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 the child ages or if he or she loses interest in the current rewards or 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 cleaned up the kitchen without being asked, you may spend an extra half-hour playing outside this afternoon."*

# Social and Family Rewards

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## **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. Older children and teenagers also appreciate pats on the back.

## **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 cleaning the kitchen while we were at the store. It made it so easy for me to put the groceries away."*

**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 cleaning helped, it taught David 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 occupied during this time.

# Structured-System Rewards

## **Sticker chart**

For younger children (pre-kindergarten through early elementary school), 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 star 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 all you did today — making your bed, getting dressed by yourself and cleaning off the dinner table. You earned three stars today. 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.

## **Poker chip or point system**

Children between ages 4 and 8 often respond to the poker chip system. Older children may respond better to a point system. Both systems operate the same. Simply use points for each occasion below that describes chips.

1. Use a set of poker chips. All chips are equal in value. If you have more than one child, use a different color for each child.
2. Explain to your child that you think he or she hasn’t been rewarded enough for doing nice things at home, and you want to change that. Together, set up a reward system with your child so he or she can earn privileges for good behavior.
3. Find or make a bank to hold the chips. Have your child help decorate a box or plastic jar if needed.
4. Work with your child to make a list of the privileges that can be earned. This should include special privileges, such as going to events outside of the home, buying a toy, and so on. It should also include common privileges, such as for use of the TV, telephone or computer, going to a friend’s home, time on the bike, and so on. List at least 5 to 10 items. Decide how many chips each privilege costs.
5. Make a second list of 3 to 4 good behaviors that you would most like to see your child do more often. Choose things your child has difficulty doing. This list is different for each child.

6. Make it clear to your child that:
  - a. Chips are given only for behavior or chores done without directions or after the first request.
  - b. Chips are not taken away for negative behavior.
7. Decide how many chips each behavior or chore is worth and record that on the list. Assign 1 to 3 chips for most items listed. Assign 5 chips for bigger items.
8. Add the number of chips your child can earn in one typical day, such as 10 or 15 chips. Most kids don't earn all of their chips every day.
9. Try to have your child spend about two-thirds of his or her chips each day on daily privileges like watching TV. This will help your child save about one-third of his or her chips for bigger rewards.
10. Offer extra chips for behavior or chores done in an especially quick or pleasant manner.
11. Go out of your way the first week to offer chips for any small, appropriate behavior. Good behaviors not on the list should be rewarded too.

# 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. So be prepared with punishments (consequences).

## 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 also “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 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 teases a sibling, the reward is bothering the sibling.
- 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 logical consequences. This type of consequence closely connects the misbehavior and the punishment.

- **Loss of a privilege:** 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, put them away until the child earns them back.
- **Positive practice:** Tell the child to correct the misbehavior. For example, if the child hits a sibling, he or she has to give the sibling 5 sincere compliments. This consequence punishes the misbehavior. And hopefully it makes the relationship better than it had been before.

## 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 experiences throughout the day typically leads to faster behavior change.

**Be ready to try something new, if needed.**

## Time-out

For children up to about age 12, 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. If that won't work, use a place that is:

- 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, be calm and direct your child to a time-out right away.
- If your child doesn't follow directions, give one warning. For example, "Samuel, you have a choice. Either turn off the TV or have a time out until you are ready to turn off the TV." If the child doesn't respond within a few seconds, 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 your direction, 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 cries, yells or acts 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 the 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.

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

# Especially for Teens

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Unless otherwise stated, information presented earlier applies to teenagers too. In addition, these topics may be helpful.

## **“Tweaked time-outs”**

When conversations become emotional or your teen doesn't cooperate, it may be helpful to suggest that everyone walk away for a few minutes to collect their thoughts. This isn't a typical time-out. It's simply time each of you can use to calm down. This can help you prepare for the discussion to continue.

## **Be flexible about rewards and consequences**

With most teenagers, it's easy to know what the favorite activities and “toys” are. Earning and losing time with those activities or items can be useful rewards and consequences.

For teens, logical rewards and consequences often revolve around:

- Cash.
- Time with the cell phone, TV or computer (often referred to as “screen time”).
- Access to a car, receiving gas money or having the insurance paid.
- Time with friends.
- Attending special events.

# Final Thoughts

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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.





## BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

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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