



Guiding Young Children Series To Prevent Misbehavior

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It is easier to keep misbehavior from happening than to deal with it as it happens or afterward. Behavior problems can be caused by a parent. If you find yourself continually facing behavior problems with your child, stop and look carefully at your own behavior. Planning ahead to prevent such circumstances is hard work and takes time, but the results are worth it.

So that you and your child can enjoy a calmer, happier life, see if the following suggestions work for you. Try to give each suggestion a two week trial period in order to experience the true results. Try only one new technique at a time. Changing the way you treat your child is difficult. Forming new habits takes time. Be calm and patient. Once you have become accustomed to the new habit it will seem natural to you.

Change the Setting

Look around your house to see what is causing your child's misbehavior. Sometimes changing the setting will prevent misbehavior. Remember, this is your child's home too. Your child should be comfortable and free to explore your family's home.

Infants and toddlers. For infants and toddlers, changing the setting means child-proofing the home. Put anything that is breakable, valuable, or dangerous out of reach. It also frees the parent from constantly saying "No!"

Children at this age are curious and want to explore their world by touching and tasting, which is perfectly normal. Keep the floor clean and forbidden objects safely out of reach or locked away. Then your child will be safe while exploring. Provide your baby with safe things to bang and chew on. Doing this will keep babies from becoming frustrated by allowing them to satisfy their natural curiosity for learning.

Child-proofing your home is an important first step in parenting, but does not replace the need for supervision. Infants and toddlers need close watching. A responsible adult must be nearby to see, hear, and touch the children. Preschoolers can be supervised from a distance as long as the adult can see and hear them. School-age children can be safely supervised by sound. The adult may not always need to see what school-age children are doing, but must be able to hear them to know they are safe.

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Play-time at home helps the child feel more comfortable and respected.

Ask yourself:

- Am I making it easy for my child to behave well?
- Do I provide interesting play-things?
- Are my rules few and reasonable?
- Am I fair and consistent in enforcing rules?
- Do I use more "do's" than "don'ts?"
- Do I let my child make choices?
- Do I give my child time to get ready for a change?

Ask yourself:

- "What in our home makes it hard for my child to behave?"
- "Do we have shelves and boxes for toys?"
- "Are hooks placed low so that my child can hang up clothes without help?"
- "If my child runs through the living room, can I arrange the furniture to block the path?"
- "Is there a safe outside place to run—a fenced yard or playground?"
- "Does my child get a chance to play actively outside and with other children?"

Changing the setting makes life easier for both the parent and the child. Provide a place to keep toys that the child can easily reach. Provide interesting things to play with and a safe and secure place to play. Serve your child's drinks in cups with lids or in glasses that will not tip over easily or break.

You can change the setting even when you are outside your home. If the children misbehave in the store, do not take them shopping. If they misbehave in church, take them to the church nursery. Church and shopping can test the patience of young children. Young children cannot passively sit still for much longer than 10 minutes.

If you have to take your child to a difficult place or event, take along appropriate books and toys. Tell the child where you are going and what behavior is appropriate. Take a trip to the park together to release tension after the difficult event.

Provide Interesting Play Activities

One of the main reasons for a child's misbehavior is boredom. If children have interesting things to do, they will not become bored and resort to misbehavior. Children involved in interesting play activities do not whine or annoy brothers and sisters.

Do not use television to keep a child occupied. Children should not watch more than one to two hours of television per day. Playthings do not need to be expensive toys. Many times, children would even prefer household items such as pots, pans, bowls, and boxes.

Have you thought of:

- Swings made from old tires
- A tree house
- Dress-up clothes
- Washable magic markers
- A mattress for jumping
- Old catalogs or magazines with pictures to cut
- Fabric scraps from which to cut, sort, and make doll clothes
- Blocks
- Sandbox
- Homemade playdough recipe—
3 cups flour, 1 cup salt, mix together, add 2 tablespoons vegetable oil plus about 2/3 cup colored water to hold dough together. Knead on a floured surface until pliable, but not sticky.

Make Rules

Most parents are great at making rules. "Don't run in the house." "You can't watch television anymore." "Use your napkin." Sometimes parents make so many rules they forget what they have said. Children may be punished for breaking a rule on one occasion and in other instances not be punished. The results lead to frustrated children and irritated parents.

Your child is likely to behave if rules are few, reasonable, consistently enforced, and flexible. Children need rules. They feel secure when they know what to do. Carefully think through your family rules. Talk about the rules under pleasant circumstances, not when you have a headache or lack time and patience. Let your children have input into family rules. Listen to and respect their suggestions.

List the rules you have issued this past week.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

If you cannot remember them, do not expect your child to. Take a look at the goals you have for your child. See if you can list two or three important rules which reflect your values.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Talk to your child about the rules. Explain why the rules are important to you. Children will be more likely to follow the instructions if they understand the reasons for them. By following the above guidelines for making rules, it will become clear to your child that the rules are not just the result of your bad temper. Parents should then model good behavior by also following the family rules. Rules should not be just for the child, but for all family members.

Consistently enforce these rules. If you ignore a misbehavior one day, but correct the child on another day, your child will not know what to expect. To keep everyone from feeling confused and frustrated, be consistent. This way, the child knows what behavior is expected and knows what to expect from you. The child knows, "If I do this, this will happen." Parents need to follow through with what they say, gradually giving the child responsibility for maintaining good behavior. If your child breaks the rules, however, consequences should be sure and swift. Children soon learn to ignore rules if parents do not follow through by enforcing them, or if they are not consistent. The best way to help your child follow the rules is to model the expected behavior. If all family members participate in making the rules and then follow the rules, your child will find it much more difficult to misbehave.

Your family may set a rule in which everyone helps with the house and yard work on Saturday morning and goes to a movie in the afternoon. For example, Karen prolongs getting dressed and is not ready to help with the chores until 11:00 a.m. when everyone has almost finished the work. Karen must miss the movie, do extra weekday chores, or pay her brother to do her work. Punishment should be based on what the family decides is appropriate.

Be flexible. Although consistency is important, there are times when parents need to make changes. For example, if grandmother is visiting, Trudy may stay up past her regular bedtime. Also, rules need to change as the child grows. A rule that is appropriate for a three-year-old may not be right for a five-year-old. A child who is three-years-old must not ride a tricycle in the street. When the child is older and has learned to follow rules, it may be safe to ride a bike in the street.

Cooperative Rule Setting

Allow your children to participate in setting the rules, and also to have a part in deciding the consequences for breaking the rules. Your children will be more likely to have respect for your rules and view the consequences as a result of their behavior, not as a punishment from you. Cooperative rule setting helps your children learn to take responsibility for their behavior.

Make as few rules as possible. Rules that concern health and safety are the most important. Families should enjoy one another rather than constantly policing each other. The more rules there are, the less time there is for fun things like reading stories and playing together. A family should be comfortable at home. Your home should be a place for your child to feel happy and successful, not always on guard.

Make the time to sit down as a family and discuss the rules of your house, deciding together which rules are necessary. Look at several aspects of your routine and areas of your home that may be potential problems. Remember that different rules may apply to children of different ages within the same household. Make sure the rule is appropriate for the child's stage of development. What are your family rules regarding bedtime, mealtime, and watching television? What are the consequences for breaking the rules?

Now, examine each rule and ask the following questions:

- Is it necessary for the child's safety?
- Is it necessary for the safety or well-being of others?
- Can you enforce it fairly and consistently?
- Is it necessary for the protection of property?
- What does your child learn from this rule?

Follow through. If a family rule does not seem to be working, talk about it together. It is important to keep communication open and be willing to change. Carefully made family rules help children to learn responsibility for their own actions and cut down on misbehavior. This, in turn, makes all family members happier and more successful in their own home, which is important to your child's self-esteem.

Use "Do's" Instead of "Don'ts"

Use positive discipline. Teach your child what to do, instead of what not to do. It is more effective to tell your child the behavior you want and why. Eliminate the use of "no," "don't," and "stop that!" For example, instead of yelling at

A note about children setting rules and consequences:

Children need to know that adults are in charge. The parent or parents must have the final say in the rules and their enforcement. It is good for children to be involved in decision making and in rule enforcement, yet they also need the security of adult guidance.

Children, especially teenagers, tend to make rules too difficult and the consequences too harsh. Adults must help children have realistic expectations of themselves and others. What seems a logical consequence may in reality inconvenience the entire family, or interfere with school-work. See "T-2328, Encouraging Self-Control" for more ideas about consequences as a form of discipline.

James to keep his feet off the chair, say, "Keep your feet on the floor. It is safer and I just cleaned the chair."

Learning to use "do's" rather than "don'ts" requires much practice, but results in a happier, better-behaving child. This also helps the parent in feeling better due to an increased positive attitude and decreased policing of their child.

Set a Good Example

One of the best ways to prevent misbehavior is to set a good example. Children learn by imitating the people they love. If Mother yells and calls Lisa a brat for snatching her sister's doll, Lisa learns to yell and call people names. If Lisa's father gets mad and loses his temper when the car will not start, then Lisa learns to lose her temper when faced with a problem, instead of finding a way to solve the problem.

Lisa's parents could set a good example and show concern for others if they admit their anger. When they safely release their anger and calmly solve the problem, Lisa learns to handle stress. She also learns that it is OK to be angry, how to control and express anger without hurting others, and how to solve problems peacefully.

Give Choices

Whenever possible, give children a choice between two acceptable behaviors. Giving choices is one way to prevent

Don'ts	Do's
"Don't pull the cat's tail."	"Pet the cat like this, from front to back."
"Don't drag your coat on the floor."	"Hold your coat like this, over your shoulder, so it will stay clean."
"Don't throw the ball inside the house."	"If you want to throw the ball, go outside where it's safer."

misbehavior, while at the same time, helping the child learn to make good decisions. For example, say "Randy, it really bothers me when you run in the house. You can either play with your toys or go outside and run."

Offering two undesirable choices is not really giving the child a choice. For example, if Jose is beating his drum and his mother says "Jose, you can either stop that or you will not get your allowance this week!" Jose would not like either of these choices and may see the statement as a threat.

If you do not want the child to make the decision, then do not give the child a choice. For example, suppose the temperature is cool outside. Evy is going out to play. You say, "Evy, don't you want to put your sweater on? It's cool outside!" What will you do if she answers "No?" You can give her a choice of putting her sweater on before she goes outside, or a choice to stay inside. Another example would be to ask Evy if she wants to wear her blue sweater or her red one. This way, the child is allowed to make the choice, but either choice is acceptable.

Get the Child's Attention

Move close to the child, bend down to the child's level and say the child's name to get their attention before speaking. For example, say "Claire" and wait until she looks at you, "Thank you for playing outside while I talked on the phone. I could talk with my friend and you did not have to be quiet." Sometimes, you may need to go to Claire and place your hand on her shoulder to get her attention. Then say, "Claire, remember you cannot ride your trike in the street. It is too dangerous."

Many times parents think children are being disobedient when in actuality they did not hear the request. While children have the same emotions as adults, their minds do not work like an adult's mind. Mother may be able to cook dinner, help Sandra with her homework, and think about her grocery list all at the same time. When a child is playing, this activity requires their full attention, and it takes time for a child to shift the focus of their attention.

Give Warning Time

Give your child a five to ten minute warning when it is time to make a change. Children do not have the same sense of time as adults. Adults do not like to be interrupted and neither do children. Giving a warning that it will soon be time to come in from outside for dinner allows your child to finish playing or pick up toys. Your child is more likely to obey when the request is made ahead of time and with respect. Walking in and turning off the television and telling your child to come to dinner is disrespectful and causes anger. Most adults would never do this to another adult. Try to treat your child as respectfully as you would treat others. Make requests of your child the way you want to be treated when your child or someone else asks you to do something.

Spend Time With Your Children

Your child needs regular time **alone** with you. Your child needs your undivided attention, so plan times with your child when you are not reading or watching television. Avoid distractions from other children in the family. This is very difficult for many busy parents, but even ten minutes spent alone together can make a difference. Mother may choose 15



Children who regularly receive parents' undivided attention do not find it necessary to misbehave to get that attention.

minutes before bedtime or after dinner. Father may choose a short time each evening or an hour on Saturday. Single parents may take the child to lunch during the week. Time together should be special. Do something that you both enjoy. Talking is important, even with very young children. This is a time when they should be able to tell you what they are thinking. Listen carefully to what the child wants to say. This is a time when you can learn to communicate with each other and develop a close relationship.

Spending time regularly with your child shows the child's importance to you. Children who regularly receive parents' undivided attention do not find it necessary to misbehave to get that attention.

Summary

To Prevent Misbehavior

1. It is easier on a parent and child to prevent misbehavior than to deal with misbehavior.
2. Providing interesting play for children keeps them learning and out of mischief.
3. Rules which are reasonable, flexible, and consistently enforced reduce misbehavior.
4. Parents can reduce misbehavior by setting examples of self-control and kindness.
5. Allowing a child to make a choice between two acceptable behaviors helps prevent misbehavior.
6. Children are more likely to do what you ask if you get their attention before giving instructions.
7. When children are playing, they need a five to ten minute warning before changing activities.

Practice Exercises

- Choose one suggestion for preventing misbehavior and try it this week.
- Change at least one thing in your home to make it easier for your child to behave well.
- Make at least one new homemade toy or game this week to share with your child.
- Practice giving your child a choice at least one time each day this week.
- Decide how you would handle the following situations:
 - Three year old Sharon is watching TV and it is her bedtime.
 - Jim keeps pestering mother for a cookie. Lunch will be ready in an hour and mother does not want him to eat a cookie now.
 - Rosa and Al sit beside each other in the car. After a few minutes they fall into the usual pattern of kicking and hitting one another.

- Answers**
- Change the setting to provide a relaxing bedtime routine, bath, and time for a story or conversation. Make rules about TV, one hour per day. Give warning time before time to stop TV watching. Be understanding on special occasions.
 - Change the setting by serving nutritious snacks between meals; schedule lunch earlier. Be positive. The cookies are for dessert after lunch.
 - Change the setting by having them sit in other places or stop for exercise outdoors. Provide an interesting play activity.

A Record of My Discipline Practices and Their Effects

Complete this exercise one week after studying To Prevent Misbehavior. Check the blanks that apply to you.

The way I usually disciplined this week was:

- _____ Compare one child with another
- _____ Explain reasons calmly
- _____ Ignore misbehavior
- _____ Isolate the child from others
- _____ Let the child make choices and experience consequences
- _____ Praise
- _____ Prevent misbehavior before it occurs
- _____ Remove privileges
- _____ Scold
- _____ Shame the child
- _____ Show disapproval
- _____ Spank
- _____ Threaten and not follow through
- _____ Threaten and follow through
- _____ Yell and scream

During the past week I:

	More	Less	Same
Acted calmly	_____	_____	_____
Acted firmly with kindness	_____	_____	_____
Let my child learn from consequences	_____	_____	_____
Used kind words	_____	_____	_____
Used unkind words	_____	_____	_____

The atmosphere in our home has changed to one of:

	More	Less	Same
Confusion	_____	_____	_____
Cooperation	_____	_____	_____
Friendliness	_____	_____	_____
Fun	_____	_____	_____
Hostility	_____	_____	_____
Tension	_____	_____	_____
Understanding	_____	_____	_____

Family Rules

Write down your family rules and consequences.

Rules

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Consequences

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

See How Much You Have Learned!

Which of the following statements are true and which are false?

1. Child proofing the home spoils the child.
2. It takes expensive toys, television, and computers to keep a child interested.
3. Never make a change in the rules.
4. Children behave better when parents tell them what to do rather than saying "no", "don't", and "stop" continuously.
5. Children will swear, yell, and lie if their parents swear, yell, and lie.
6. Giving a child a choice shows that the parent is too easy on the child.

If you want to know more:

Videos:

- VT 364 Building Strong Families: Helping Kids Behave
- VT 356 Catch 'em Being Good

Paperback:

- Benson, P., J. Galbraith. & P. Espeland. (1995). *What Kids Need To Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways To Raise Good Kids*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Exercises adapted from *Practical Education for Parenting* by Kent G. Hamdorf, Extension Specialist, Human Relations

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Children involved in interesting activities rarely misbehave.

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