



Toddler Behavior Management

The most important keys to successful behavior management are consistency and repetition.

Raleigh Pediatric Associates

It is your responsibility as parents to teach children acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Research tells us that healthy, balanced children come from homes where there are firm rules and structure which are consistently enforced. Parents should set high standards for behavior and performance which children are expected to live up to.

The best way to teach behavior is to use rewards. Rewards may be smiles, hugs, praise or treats. Give rewards after good behavior, so your child will begin associating the behavior with receiving a good result (rewards). They will quickly learn that bad behavior produces negative consequences (no rewards).

Make sure you do not accidentally reward the problem behaviors. In most cases you can eliminate bad behavior by consistently ignoring it. Negative attention is still attention and the child may continue to behave badly just to get you to pay attention to them. Not giving any rewards including your attention should cause the behavior to decrease.

Your child will cooperate with the rules when there is an overall positive relationship where he/she feels valued and loved. Rewards such as positive attention, hugs, praise and love help establish this relationship.

Make sure your child understands. Give clear instructions, so that your child knows what is expected and why they are being rewarded or not.

Set your child up to succeed. Do everything you can think of to make it less likely that the problem behavior can happen. If your child gets irritable and behaves badly when they haven't napped, then try to arrange your schedule so that they will have time for sleep. Place things out of their reach to remove temptation.

Get organized. Start with a simple plan that is easy to do, and stick to it. Keep a written record of progress, so that you know what works and what doesn't. If something isn't working, try to figure out why and try a new plan based on what you have learned.

What Doesn't Work:

- Yelling
- Scolding
- Lecturing
- Threatening
- Bribing
- Spanking
- Name calling
- Criticizing
- Sending your child to bed

What Does Work:

- **Ignore.** If your child is having a temper tantrum, calmly leave the room and ignore him/her. (You can ignore interrupting, nagging, silly questions, siblings bickering, whining, stuttering, I hate you statements. *Never ignore if your child is hurting someone else or themselves (hitting, kicking, or biting), throwing or breaking something on purpose.*)

- **Change the situation.** If your children are fighting, have them stop playing together until they can calm down and play nicely.
- **Change the environment.** Your toddler keeps playing with your cell phone, so do not leave it out where they can reach it.
- **Say what you want.** Tell your child what you want them to do, instead of what you do not. Say, “Remember, we must walk inside”, instead of saying, “Do not run!”
- **Distract.** There is only one red ball. Your child and his cousin both want the red ball. Try picking up your child and have him help you feed the fish.
- **Take away a privilege.** Your older child teases your younger child. Tell the older sibling he cannot stay up and watch his favorite TV show.
- **Positive feedback.** Your child cleans up his/her toys before you ask. Remember to give a hug and a thank you.
- **If-then.** If you clean up your room, then we can go to the park.
- **Prevent.** If your child always wants to walk around in the restaurant, tell him before you enter that he must sit in his seat. Reward your child for their good behavior.
- **Accept and Tolerate.** It’s a warm day in July and your child puts on his winter boots. You think it looks crazy, but you let her wear them.
- **Catch them being good.** Your child repeatedly leaves his books on the floor. When he puts them back on the bookcase without you asking him, tell him “you put away your books all by yourself. That’s great!” Look for other times you can catch your child behaving the way you want him to and then provide praise.
- **Active listening.** Your child tells you, Josh isn’t my friend anymore. I hate him! You respond, “it sounds like Josh made you mad. Why do you feel this way?”
- **Charts and stars.** Give your child a visual reminder of every time he or she does something right. For example, focus on one problem. Let’s say your daughter never cleans up her toys. Give her a star for every day she cleans up. After three stars on her chart, give her a reward.

. Another effective form of discipline is “**time out.**” When using time out, the following points are important.

1. Pick a safe boring place
2. Keep the time relatively short (minutes/per age of child)
3. Do not allow any talking
4. Parents decide when the time is up (using a timer or a clock is helpful)
5. Do not debate, discuss, or argue

CONSISTENCY is the most important aspect of teaching good behavior. It is important that the parents be consistent between themselves and consistent day to day. A mother cannot teach her little boy not to throw a ball in the house, if dad comes home and encourages a game of catch in the living room. Children learn behavior by imitating people around them, particularly their parents. Parents must set the example they want their children to follow.

Once you have told a child about the negative consequences for their behavior, it is very important to follow through. Don’t tell them that they can’t watch TV this week only to give in a day later. This teaches your child that you don’t mean what you say, so why should they listen?

Considerable time and effort is needed to teach children how to behave in ways that are acceptable within the family and within society. No child is perfect, but with consistent rules, expectations and love they will grow to be a healthy well balanced child.