

Success and the Single Parent: Positive Parenting- Understanding Children's Behavior¹

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Overview



One of the hardest jobs a single parent faces is how to set limits for our children's behavior. Children can try our patience. They can also bring us lots of happiness. As a single parent you face the daily tasks involved with raising children on your own. Handling various behavioral situations is seldom easy. It can be even more difficult when you are without a partner to share ideas with. When you become a single parent, expect disruptive behavior in your children--no matter what their ages. It is normal. Your child/ren is also experiencing a difficult life change.

Studies have discovered that parents who practice a kind but firm style of discipline raise healthy children. Successful discipline means giving the care and love children need, while setting limits for inappropriate behavior. We can have this balance by showing respect, kindness, and lots of patience with our children. Remember, all children misbehave at some time.

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Why Do Children Misbehave?

Knowing why children misbehave is important. If we can identify their behavior, we can respond more appropriately to their actions. Some possible reasons:

- **Children are curious and impulsive in nature.** They are growing and are developing social skills. They lack adult experience. Mistakes and misbehaviors are part of the learning process.
- **Children have a strong desire to be independent.** They may go beyond the boundaries and limits set by their parent.
- **Children need plenty of sleep, nutritious food, exercise and fresh air.** Children misbehave when they don't feel well or are tired.



- **Children need to feel they belong.** They need to know they are valued. If there is a divorce or if the family moves to a new neighborhood, children may feel scared and alone.
- **Children need encouragement.** Children who don't hear praise for the positive things they do will try to get attention by misbehaving.

Guiding Children’s Behavior

Appropriate behavior in our children comes when a parent shows:

- positive attitudes
- understanding of their children's development

- kindness and respect for their children
- lots of patience

Sometimes we forget these basics and try to control our children's behavior by making threats. Yelling, name-calling, put-downs and spanking can hurt a child's spirit. As a parent, you are the most important person in your child's life and how you treat him* will make a lasting impression. To understand your children's behavior, keep in mind two basic premises: 1) children are social beings who want to belong to the family and feel worthwhile, and 2) children are decision-makers.

You will feel differently about misbehavior if you realize that behind the misbehavior is a child who just wants to belong. He is confused about how to accomplish this goal. When a child is behaving, as you would like, for example, playing well with a friend, sharing his toys nicely, or not whining, what happens? The parent is likely to ignore the situation, thinking, "I don't want to even look that way" for fear of spoiling the moment. We often forget that giving a child a word of praise or pat on the back for good behavior is the key to making the child feel he is significant and belongs to the family. Noticing good behavior encourages the child to do more of the same. This is called "catching a child doing something right" instead of catching him doing something wrong.

What happens when the situation reverses, if instead of behaving well the child acts up? Usually, the child gets immediate attention! The parent might scold or lecture him in some way, resulting in negative attention. For many children this is the only way they know how to meet their need to belong. Children will do anything for parental attention—they even prefer negative attention to no parental attention at all.



A parent's job is to help the child choose better behaviors. The guidance you give will improve the child's social skills and feelings of self-worth. Children can be taught to make decisions about their behavior. Instead of giving children orders such as, "Make your bed," "Do your homework," "Don't yell at me," and so on, you can ask questions or give them choices:

- "Guaranteed, you can go out to play as soon as your bed is made."
- "Do you want to do your homework now or after dinner?"
- "Kim, you sound angry. I'll be glad to listen when you can speak softly to me."

Guidelines to Understanding Your Child’s Behavior

There are many ways to improve your parenting skills when it comes to guiding your children's behavior. Read through these guideline ideas; add your own. Make a decision to use at least five ideas. Check off the ones you will practice when you go through the list again.

- **Learn the stages of your child's development and what to expect with each stage.** For example, you would not expect a three-year-old to stay still in a stroller on a long shopping trip.
- **Make sure your child's surroundings are safe and activities are good for his age.** This can avoid a lot of frustration for the child as well as for you. It also increases your child's success. If a child is always hearing "no" or "don't do that," he will have less curiosity and self-confidence. A discouraged child may

stop trying new things and will not fully develop to his potential.

- **Remove children from situations they can't handle.** You can redirect or distract them to a more appropriate activity.
- **Make rules clear.** The fewer rules you make the better. It is best to set rules with your children's input. Decide along with your children what will happen if the rules aren't followed. Make sure the consequences are fair for your child's age and that the consequences relate to the misbehavior. If we make rules sensitive to the children's needs, we will teach them to respect rules and to see their family's world as a safe place (see Activities I and II).
- **If your child can read, post the rules in their room and on the refrigerator door.** Have your child pick out just where--and help decorate or color the paper the rules are on.
- **Re-evaluate rules as your children grow in ability and responsibility.**
- **Try to understand your child's point of view.**
- **Make requests politely.** You're setting an example for him to follow.
- **Enforce the rules.** If you only sometimes follow the rules, your child won't know if you really mean what you say. A child won't understand the rule about going to bed on time if today he's allowed to watch one more show on TV, tomorrow he falls asleep on the couch, and the following day he's yelled at for not being in bed on time. Consistency has a big payoff.
- **Be specific about what you expect from your child.** For example, if your child

wants to go grocery shopping with you, his idea of being good might be different from yours. Be clear. Discuss the behavior you expect from him in the store. Do it before you go into the store and get distracted by you task.

- **Remain calm.** Count up to 10--or even 100-- before you act. Separate yourself from the situation for a few minutes if at all possible.
- **Set a good example.** Children imitate those around them. They learn what they live.
- **Forgive yourself as a parent for those times you overreact with your child.** No one is perfect.
- **Give warning time.** Tell children five or ten minutes ahead of time that the activity they are doing will be changing.
- **Make a promise to yourself never to compare your child to others.** Focus on your child's special and positive qualities. When you accept him for just being himself, he will develop into a self-respecting human being.

Children--like all of us--make mistakes. With positive and loving support from their parent, they can learn appropriate behavior while growing up. They will also form social skills that result in children who are easier to live with, more agreeable to be around.

What’s Next

If you have made up your mind to practice some of the ideas suggested in this publication, it will take some time for you and your children to adjust. Remember: before it gets better, it will get worse. Humans are creatures of habit. Your children may try to test you, the new rules, and the consequences. It will take some time for both you and your children to adjust. Don't give

up. Hang in there. It takes 21 days to break--or make--a habit.



If you think your family needs to work more on setting boundaries, there are other options. You can take more parenting classes, join a support group, or seek family counseling. Seeking counseling doesn't mean you're a failure as a parent. It means you care enough about your family to go the extra mile.

Also, your Florida county Cooperative Extension office can give you more information. There are many publications that are available to you. If your county Cooperative Extension office doesn't have the information you need, one of the people there will help you find the necessary resources. Contact your local Cooperative Extension office for educational help.

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*Success and the Single Parent uses “he”, “his”, or
“him” to represent children of both genders.*

Activity I

Guidelines for Rules:

When making rules in your family, remember these important principles:

1. Rules are more cheerfully and willingly followed when all family members have a voice in making them.
2. A good rule must be stated clearly and understood by all parties. Preferably, each rule should be clearly written out.
3. A good rule must be reasonable and enforceable.
4. A good rule should be attached to a specific and known consequence that will occur when the rule is broken. ***For example:***

Rule: No running in stores

Consequence: Child will be put in cart and not allowed to walk around freely.

Activity II

Post It!

In the following, list rules you have and the consequences you give if they are not followed. For example:

Rule: No running in stores.

Consequence: Child will be put in cart and not allowed to walk around freely.

1. A. Rule: _____

B. Consequence: _____

2. A. Rule: _____

B. Consequence: _____

3. A. Rule: _____

B. Consequence: _____

4. A. Rule: _____

B. Consequence: _____

5. A. Rule: _____

B. Consequence: _____

6. **A. Rule:** _____

B. Consequence: _____

7. **A. Rule:** _____

B. Consequence: _____

8. **A. Rule:** _____

B. Consequence: _____

9. **A. Rule:** _____

B. Consequence: _____