



Information for **parents**
from Canada's **paediatricians**

Positive discipline for young children

The **goal** of discipline is to guide and teach, not to punish. The **foundation** of discipline is a warm and trusting relationship, where you help children learn to:

- behave appropriately for their age in different situations,
- recognize, express and manage their emotions,
- communicate,
- get along with and trust others,
- solve problems,
- explore the world and learn appropriately.

Discipline should be fair and consistent. If you respond differently in similar situations or to similar behaviours, children will be confused. They won't know what to expect.

Physical punishment—spanking, slapping, hitting, or shaming—can hurt children both physically and emotionally, and should never be used. There are much more effective ways to discipline children.

Using positive discipline techniques not only helps to guide children, but also strengthens the connection you have with them.

Connect, then redirect

For young children, behaviour is a way to communicate. When a child behaves in a challenging way, it's important to understand what led to the behaviour. Ask yourself:

- Do they need something—food, a nap, or some down time with you?
- What happened before and right after the behaviour?

- Is your child responding to something in their environment? Examples include noise, other children, or a perceived threat.
- Are they stressed in some way?
- Are they expected to do something that is beyond their skill or developmental level? For example, asking toddlers to share.

Understanding the cause of your child's behaviour will help you decide how to respond.

Connect

Connecting emotionally with your child builds a healthy relationship. It's the foundation of positive discipline, and it starts with parents.

Consider how you react and respond to your child's behaviours and emotions. Do you feel upset or frustrated? Are you able to respond in a calm way? Do you raise your voice? Can you respond differently?

Here are some suggestions to help you respond to challenging behaviours in ways that strengthen your relationship with your child:

- Use "I" statements such as: "I don't like it when you do that," instead of "What's wrong with you?"
- Sit with your child and talk about their feelings and behaviour, in an age-appropriate way.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings ("I can see that you're upset"), even when they're misbehaving. It shows you respect them.
- To avoid saying "no" too often, find other ways to express what you're trying to communicate. For example, if a child hits, say: "Hands to your side"; if a child yells, say: "Use a quiet voice."
- Be comforting. For example, get below or at a child's eye level, offer a gentle nod or touch, or an empathetic look.
- Listen, and do not argue. Then repeat what your child says back to them. It shows you're paying attention and have heard what they have to say.
- Be consistent: Say what you mean; mean what you say; and follow through on what you say you were going to do.

All of these suggestions let children know that with some help, they are capable of solving problems and behaving in appropriate ways.

Redirect

Redirection—switching from one activity to another—works well with toddlers and sometimes older children.

You can also use “REDIRECT” to remember some helpful parenting habits:

- **Reduce the number of words you use when disciplining your child:** Make your message clear, firm, and brief.
- **Embrace emotions:** Acknowledging your child’s feelings is validating for them.
- **Describe the behaviour you want to see, without lecturing.**
- **Involve your child in discipline.**
- **Reframe a ‘no’ into a ‘yes’ (with conditions).** Wherever possible, tell your child what they *can* do, as opposed to what they *cannot* do.
- **Emphasize the positive things your child does.** If you only pay attention to negative behaviour, you will actually reinforce that behaviour.
- **Creatively approach the situation with humour and imagination:** “I can see you’re angry about having to leave the park. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could stay all day? Let’s think of all the things we can do next time.”
- **Teach your child how to recognize and name feelings such as frustration, sadness, anger, or disappointment.** It will help them learn how to deal with strong emotions.

Time-out or time-in?

“Time-in” is an alternative to a time-out. With a time-in, you invite your child to sit and talk with you about their feelings and behaviour in a way that they can understand. With a time-in, you connect with your child and provide comfort.

Time-outs should only be used after you’ve tried other forms of positive discipline. A time-out should:

- Be short.
- A break from all attention including demands, explanations, apologies, eye contact and hugs.

- In a distraction-free spot such as a safe, quiet chair or corner.

Time-outs should not be used with children under the age of 3.

If you have concerns

Young children won't always behave the way you want or expect them to. From time to time, they may be disruptive or aggressive. Or their behaviour may not be appropriate for the situation.

If you're having trouble dealing with your child's behaviour, it's important to talk to someone before it affects your relationship. If you find yourself feeling negative about the relationship between you and your child, speak with a health professional about what you can do.

Additional resources

- How to Give a Time-Out (American Academy of Pediatrics)
(<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Time-Outs-101.aspx>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Early Years Task Force
- Public Education Advisory Committee

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