



Effective Discipline Techniques for Each Phase of Your Child's Development

Effective Discipline Techniques for Each Phase of Your Child's Development:

Part 3 of 3 in Dr. Dabney's "Parenting through Change" series

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This three-part series on parenting derives from the specific questions my patients have asked me over the years. By far, the most common parenting mistake I see comes from parents who fail to change their disciplinary tactics as their children get older. I'd like to end this series with a practical guide — a breakdown of how parenting must evolve as your children do.

Before I jump in, let's first understand that **discipline should always be in line with the child's developmental stage, intelligence, and maturity level.** Discipline is often hard, and unless it's developmentally appropriate, it will also be ineffective.

Birth til Two

Primary developmental characteristic: No sense of object permanence

Most effective technique: Distraction

Distraction is the most common first line of discipline because very young children don't develop *object permanence* — the ability to trust that a person or object will not disappear once they are out of sight — until about the age of two. That's why removing something from the child's grasp or attention and replacing it with something more appropriate is the best form of correction during this phase.

Toddler, Preschool, and Early Elementary

Primary developmental characteristic: Vulnerable to stimulation overload

Most effective techniques: Firm but soothing redirection

During this phase, it's crucial for parents to understand that *very young children act out due to stimulation overload*, and not because of willfulness, spitefulness, or meanness. The emotional load a preschooler feels about something as small as losing a toy can be equivalent to an adult coming home to discover their beloved pet has died. If this happened to you, you might fall down on your knees and cry, and we wouldn't scold you for your behavior because we'd know that you were experiencing an emotional flood. When toddlers and preschoolers do the same, parents need to see that as an emotional surge, rather than as willful malice or naughtiness.

Time Outs

When a very young child acts out, redirect their behavior calmly. Try to identify the source of overstimulation and eliminate it as best as possible.

For example, many parents find timeouts are effective at this age because it removes the child from the overstimulating event or environment. However, timeouts should be brief (about one minute per year of age), and the parent should remain in the child's sight and/or within earshot. Even after the child develops object permanence, it can be traumatic for them if their parent disappears during an already upsetting event.

Remaining near your child during a timeout also makes it easier to soothe him or her, and hopefully speeds their ability to calm down. Imagine that you discover your son kicking a child at the playground. Try to remove him from the situation and then sit near him during a timeout while repeating a simple directive, such as "we don't kick." When the child calms down, you can allow him to return to the event to see if he can handle it again.

Temper Tantrums

For temper tantrums, I recommend T. Berry Brazleton's approach. Hold the child firmly in your arms while saying soothing statements, such as "I'm holding you to help you calm down," or "as soon as you calm down I can let you go." Some children also respond well to a warm or cool wet cloth while doing this.

Late-Elementary and Middle School

Primary developmental characteristic: Ready for emotional sublimation

Most effective techniques: Re-channeling behavior

As a child progresses into their late-elementary and middle school years, it's time for parents to begin encouraging the sublimation of their emotions. Sublimation is the rechanneling of disruptive behaviors into more appropriate activities.

For example, if an older sister consistently gets too rough when playing with a younger sibling, she is displaying aggression, though not necessarily with an intent to harm. Instead of simply punishing her for inappropriate roughness, her parents need to direct her aggression into something more appropriate, such as a sports or other physical activity. If she is only punished, she may come to believe that aggression is wrong in any situation – which is most certainly not true. Aggression is necessary for goal achievement, to stand up for ourselves and others, to excel in our work and hobbies, and for many other positive activities. Sublimation allows parents to help their child learn to transform potential liabilities into strengths.

In addition to sublimating disruptive behaviors, parents may also find the rewarding and withholding of privileges effective during this stage of a child's development. For instance, if you find your son texting something inappropriate, then taking his phone for

a short period makes sense because clearly, he is not demonstrating the judgment necessary to moderate his choices when he has access to it. The loss does not need to be for long — simply a day or two — as long as the parents explain why he’s losing it and what good phone judgment looks like.

High School

Primary developmental characteristic: Underdeveloped judgment

Most effective techniques: Talking through issues

When a child gets to high school, the most effective discipline is to talk through issues — especially from ages 16 to 19. During this phase, a child develops judgment — learning how his actions impact him and his environment, sympathy/empathy, morals — a process typically completed by the early twenties. During this time, a parent's job switches from simply keeping their child from harm to helping her use these new tools to keep herself from harm.

Consider, for example, an issue many parents of high schoolers deal with: grades. Say a child comes home with a failing grade on a major test. His parents know they have to address the problem and they initially think about taking his car away for two weeks. But they need to recognize that if they simply take the car away, they miss an opportunity to further their son’s emotional growth.

In this case, the boy’s parents should talk to him about the grade. They need to ask questions like, *What happened? What’s your plan? How can you do better in the future?* This is the only way the son can learn for himself what to do about poor performances. At this stage, children resist changing simply because someone tells them to (much like all adults). The parents’ job is to get him thinking about how he wants to conduct his life — and that means being comfortable with him

choosing something different from what they may choose for themselves.

For example, much to his parents' horror, the child might conclude he's happy with C's. If they let him "sit" with this idea for a while, he will most likely change his mind. He'll see his peers get rewarded for A's, he'll hear about college requirements, he'll get encouragement from his teachers, etc. Then, when he decides to go for A's, it will be his idea, and he'll be more likely to stick with his efforts.

Avoid perfectionism

Some kids, too, are already beating themselves up inside. Parents don't need to pile on to the disappointment the child already feels. Even more, doing so can have devastating effects on a teenager's self-esteem. Instead, keep context in mind while evaluating the severity of any issue.

If your teen is getting decent grades, treats most people with respect, and is not abusing drugs or alcohol, then maybe you can let him own the D on the chemistry test.

If you discipline your child for every little thing, you set up the idea that you expect perfection — and if that's what you expect, you're in for a world of disappointment! I can't tell you how many parents become furious when their son or daughter procrastinates on their schoolwork. I ask them, "Do you rush to get every one of your projects done several days in advance?" Of course not. So as a child advances toward young adulthood, try your best to put yourself in their shoes.

Finally, don't forget your role in your child's issues, no matter how distant it may be. Do you drink several glasses of wine in front of your kids on a regular basis? Do you badmouth friends behind their backs? Do you break promises you've made to your kids because you haven't planned or managed your time or

money properly? *Try to remember that your behavior has a lot to do with what your kids do.*

Evolving

When your children were toddlers, you probably dressed them in clothing splashed brightly with dinosaurs and princesses and trains and unicorns. But by the time they reached middle school, you know better than to even try to bring something like that home from the store. Discipline isn't much different. While there is no formula for every situation you'll encounter, there are parameters. The closer parents come to matching their reaction to their child's intellectual and developmental needs, the better.

This article comes in response to a patient request. Do you have a topic you'd like me to write about? Send it to me at dabney@DrLDabney.com.



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