

# Discipline: A Parent's Guide for Preschoolers

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This guide discusses several discipline strategies parents and other caregivers can use to help their preschooler learn appropriate behavior. Topics covered include communicating expectations in a positive manner, presenting simple choices, providing consistent routines, using time out and examining the circumstances when misbehavior occurs.



## MontGuide

MT200413 HR Reviewed 10/05

### STRIVING FOR INDEPENDENCE

while needing reassurance could be the motto of the preschool child. This is the age when children want to do things for themselves, yet they want to know that parents are nearby and supportive. Preschoolers are curious and want to know how things work. They enjoy mimicking adult actions. They also are good at saying “no” and wanting things to go their way. Kids this age believe they are the center of the world and life revolves around them.

Parents often wonder what is the best way to guide their child's behavior at this stage and how much to let their preschooler do on his or her own. Because preschoolers are learning to reason and develop self-control, parents can try different discipline techniques than those used when their child was an infant or toddler.

Although discipline actually means to teach or guide, the term is frequently associated with punishment. The goal of discipline is to teach children how to act appropriately with family and friends, in school and in the community. Punishment, on the other hand, means to suffer for an offense. It is normal for children to make mistakes and misbehave at times. A preschooler may lack the skills, strength or attention span needed to handle many common tasks, such as carrying a dinner plate or remembering to hang up her jacket each time she

comes into the house. Adults have the responsibility to guide their children so that they become competent, caring and contributing members of society. Discipline, rather than punishment, helps children to reach this goal.

### Understanding behavior

Children do not misbehave simply to make parents' lives miserable—there is a reason for their misbehavior. When a child misbehaves, the first step is to try to determine why. Is the child tired, hungry, scared, stressed, overwhelmed or hurt? Next, the parent needs to assess his or her own situation. Are *you* tired, hungry, stressed, overwhelmed, scared or hurt? Children pick up on their parents' emotions and feelings. Understanding what else is going on with your child *and* you can help determine how to handle a behavior problem.

Preschoolers are learning to improve small motor skills, such as coloring pictures or pouring juice. Kids at this age are often very eager to help. Parents who encourage their children in these activities are helping them develop muscles and learn how things work. As preschoolers practice these new skills and how to control their body, hands and feet, accidents will happen. Rather than scolding your child if he spills the milk, teach him how to clean up the mess and let him help. Then show your child again how to pour the milk successfully—this may mean with your assistance.

### Communicating expectations

Preschoolers are very active and busy. Parents can help them learn appropriate behaviors by letting them know what is expected, using positive language. If a child is running through the house, try saying, “Use walking feet inside. Running is for outside.” Compare this to the statement, “Don't run through the house!” It is easy to see that the first

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message is more positive, even though it contains the same information.

When correcting a child, remember to talk about the *behavior* that needs changing, not about the child. Repetition is needed—giving the rule one time will not be enough. The challenge is to consistently repeat the direction without losing your temper.

### Supervising activities

Although preschoolers are more self-sufficient than toddlers, they still need a great deal of supervision. Helping them explore their surroundings safely allows them to learn and gain independence. For example, a rule might be that it's okay for the preschooler to ride her tricycle as long as she stays on the

sidewalk between the hedge and the opposite end of the house. This way the parents can keep a close eye on the child.

### Simplifying life

Preschoolers can get overwhelmed. There is a great deal of stimulation in a child's world—television, computers, toys, and childcare, often with many other children. Sometimes this can be too much for a preschooler and she will start to throw a tantrum. If this is the case, try to simplify the child's life by narrowing the choices to a more manageable level. For example, you might ask, "Would you like to play with the blue truck or the red truck?" This method also allows the child to have some control over her world—her choice of a truck. Simplifying is also a good strategy to use when trying to dress a fussy preschooler in the morning.

### The importance of routine

Preschoolers are unable to tell time by the clock. Instead they use their daily routine to gauge time. Take a typical schedule at daycare, for example. Upon arrival, the children play together and then have a snack. After snack comes circle time and then the kids go outside to play. If you aren't convinced how important routine is to a preschooler, try asking the children to go outside *before* the snack. The children definitely notice.

A common struggle for parents is getting their child ready to leave the house for the day. Your preschooler wants to put on his own hat, coat and boots, and you are looking at your watch knowing you will be late for work. At times like this, tantrums can start and parents can lose their tempers. One remedy is to give the preschooler *more time* to get ready. He feels successful doing it all by himself and you aren't losing your "cool."

### Using time out

There are instances when toddlers and preschoolers are simply out of control and cannot be calmed down. The child may be very strong willed and none of the previously mentioned strategies works. This may call for a time out. Time out can provide a good opportunity for the child to gather his own feelings and thoughts and calm down. Parents want children to learn to control their tempers; however, young children do not yet have the capacity. Use an agreed upon place for time out—one that is free of stimulation, safe and not scary.

How long should a child stay in time out? One idea is to equate the number of minutes with the age of the child. For example, a two-year-old would receive two minutes of time out, as sitting any longer may be difficult and not necessarily more effective. For older preschoolers, parents could give them the option of determining themselves how long they need to be in time out. You might tell your child, "You may come back and play when you are calm." Avoid using time out for *every* misbehavior.

The preschool years are filled with new adventures for a child. Parents and other adult caregivers can guide children as they explore their world. Offer simple choices to preschoolers, provide consistent routines whenever possible, use time out sparingly and remember—when a preschooler is upset, examine her day as well as yours to see what might be causing the misbehavior. No single discipline strategy works in every instance; however being aware of a variety of techniques provides an opportunity to be ready for most all situations.

### For further reading

- Brazelton, T. B. & Sparrow, J. D. (2003). *Discipline the Brazelton Way*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Nelsen, J., Lott, L. & Glenn, S. (1999). *Positive Discipline A-Z, Revised and Expanded 2nd Edition: From Toddlers to Teens, 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems*. New York: Random House.
- Steinberg, L. (2004). *The 10 Basic Principles of Good Parenting*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

### Acknowledgements

- Cameron Clark, Madison County Extension Agent
- Diana DelCampo, Ph.D., Extension Specialist, New Mexico State University
- Verlin Koenig, Valley County Extension Agent
- Merrylee Vukonich, Carbon County Extension Agent
- Jane Wolery, Teton County Extension Agent



<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt200413.html>

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**File under: Human Development**

**E-16 (Parent Education)**

**Reviewed Oct. 2005  
2000 10.05GM**