

Smack or Snack

Ten top tips for the best ways to correct bad behaviour in children

By Chris Barnardo

I recently overheard a stressed parent telling off their little child, "If you don't stop that, I'm going to give you a smack!"

The child looked up, eyes bright, "What kind of snack?" he asked.

I thought it was funny at the time, but it got me thinking about discipline and the merits of punishment versus reward in the wider sense, especially with regard to separated parents, who have to deal with the same children but in widely different circumstances. A mother will complain that her children's father has no discipline and spoils them when he sees them, and that makes it hard for her to

keep order the rest of the time. On the other hand, no father wants to spend the precious little time he gets to spend with his kids, constantly disciplining them and enforcing what he sees as his ex-partner's rules, on his time. Meanwhile the children go backwards and forwards and develop their own ideas about what is right and wrong and what they can get away with at mum's or at dad's house.

Post separation discipline can turn out to be a problem. During the split up, routines and house rules often get put to one side because there are bigger battles to fight, and what routines emerge after the storm

of the separation has settled down, are new and often difficult for the children to get used to. A year down the line you can find yourself stressed and constantly fire fighting difficult, badly behaved children, or feeling like a policeman constantly enforcing overly strict rules, with no obvious way of getting things back on track.

The fact is, it's tough bringing up kids on your own, whether you get to see them once a fortnight or they live with you, but it's not impossible. So here are our ten top tips for basics of discipline and how to get things working smoothly in your home.

Be consistent

Being consistent is one of the most important elements of good discipline. Inconsistency is confusing and leads to children become stressed and behaving badly. They have no idea what the rules are because it seems that different things are expected of them at different times. A good way to be consistent is not to have too many rules, save the rule making for the important things and stick to them.

Lead by example

If you want your children to behave in a particular way, behave that way yourself. Help them do the things that you want them to do the first few times you ask them. Be courteous when you interact with other people and show your kids that you think of others when you do things. You are their biggest role model and they learn more how to behave by watching you than by you telling them.

Don't punish your kids because you are angry at something else

The unpleasant part of discipline - punishment, is rendered useless when done in anger or out of frustration that is caused by something unrelated

to the bad behaviour of the child. Punishment only works when it is obviously a direct response to the misbehaviour and proportionate with it. If your anger is caused by things beyond the child's control, all they'll learn, is that "when daddy is angry with mummy he shouts at me" (or the other way round), and because they will not connect the telling off with their behaviour, it will not have much of a corrective effect.

Give your kids warning when you expect them to do something

It's easier to do what you're told when you feel you have some control over it. Giving a 20 minute and then a 5 minute warning that you want your child to stop what they are doing and do something else, is a very good way of getting them to do what you want. "In 20 minutes I want you to stop playing X-Box and start tidying your room, laying the table, or doing your home work." Is likely to work much better than just telling your child to stop what they are doing immediately. It says that you are in overall command of the situation; it shows you are thinking ahead, but at the same time it shows them that you are giving them a bit of space to finish off what they are doing. Importantly, it gives them time to get used to the idea.

Be prepared to give a few more warnings as you come up to the deadline. Always stick to the time limit you set at the outset, otherwise your children will quickly learn that 20 minutes means an hour, or if they grind you down, they might be able to string things out for the whole evening, and completely resist doing what you asked.

Never threaten something you can't deliver

How many times have you heard the words, "if you do that again we're going home!" or "If you do that we'll never come here again!" Both are hollow threats that everyone knows to be untrue. Saying them is a waste of time and utterly diminishes other promises and threats you make when disciplining your children. When trying to stick to your guns, your best bet is not to make rash threats in the first place. It helps to consider some alternatives before the situation arises that needs them. For example, it would be much better to say in the restaurant, "If you do that again we are going to go and stand outside until you are ready to come in again."

If you threaten something then carry it through immediately your child misbehaves. Don't go back on your word or give in if your child complains. If you have set the threat at an appropriate level, you won't have to go back on your word, but you can reassure your child that there is always a next time and when they behave next time, they won't have this punishment.

If you have withheld something they like for a day (or a limited period) don't give in before the time is up, just reassure them that when the period is over, they can have back what you confiscated, and next time if they don't misbehave they won't have to have it taken away again.

Forgive and move on

Once the punishment is done, move on. Don't let your child's bad behaviour put you in a bad mood which you then work through by being grumpy towards them and badly behaved yourself. This hardens your child's resistance to a telling off and all they end up learning, is that being badly behaved is ok (because daddy or mummy does it) providing you can put up with the odd telling off. Punishment is only effective in changing children's behaviour when there is a clearly defined difference between their normal interaction with you, and when they are being told off for something that they have done wrong.

If you harbour anger and resentment towards them (or your situation in general) and as

a result allow the tellings off to merge together, then they become the new status quo between you and them, and in order to make an impact next time there is some bad behaviour, you have to escalate to a more extreme punishment. The worst result of this scenario is an ineffective and angry downward spiral of unrewarding behaviour and relationship problems. When you're on your own with your children, and they are misbehaving, it is very hard not to get drawn in to an angry exchange and as a result harbour resentment. If possible try to get some support, even if it's phoning up your own mother or father, or best friend, to just spend two minutes chatting with them, to refresh your grown up outlook and let you stand back from the potential conflict.

Leave room for escalation

It's a simple thing to say and a very difficult thing to deliver, especially when you're stressed but ramp up the sanctions bit by bit. Misbehaving is a bit like heavy metal poisoning, in that it tends to build up in the system with each new event adding to the previous one, until even a small misdemeanour causes an enormous explosive punishment. If you repeatedly find things getting out of hand, you'll find it helps to think of the situation beforehand and come up with a plan.

Talk to your friends and family about how to tackle a particular repetitive bad behaviour and work out an escalating series of measures when you are calm and things aren't emotionally charged. When you are calm, sit down with your child and explain what is wrong with the way things are going, listen to what they have to say to see if there is a reason for the behaviour that you can address separately, and tell them what actions you are going to take if it happens again, and how what stages you will escalate to if the bad behaviour carries on.

Look for the reason beyond the moment and address that

Often misbehaving is the result of some unseen influence, a bad day at school, some unresolved anxiety, or something physical such as having a headache, feeling ill or being hungry. Regardless of what instant response is necessary in each situation, step back and consider the wider picture. Bad behaviour can often occur when children get hungry and when parents live apart often meal routines are disrupted at the weekend, by the need for the child to travel from house to house at or around normal meal times. Have some health snacks that your child likes handy for

emergencies, nevertheless make sure you stick to meal times.

If bad behaviour persists, then once things have calmed down, take the first opportunity to talk you your child about what is going on at school or how they feel. Don't question them about their other home or what your ex-partner is doing, just take steps to become aware of what they are feeling generally. Don't give them loads and loads of attention and deep discussions directly after or during their misbehaving, part of their behaviour could be attention seeking, and you don't want to reinforce that behaviour. Instead, when they are being good, chat to them and give them attention or spend time together, planning something nice to do, so as to reinforce the best behaviour.

Understand that your ex-partner has a different set of circumstances to you

Rules and routines at your ex-partner's house will be different to yours. Where possible coordinate basic rules and at all times support your ex-partner's discipline. If you have issues with how your ex-partner is disciplining your children, then take these up with her (or him) directly and not by making disparaging comments about it to the children.

Never make your love conditional on them behaving

Never with draw your love and affection if your children misbehave. Feeling unloved is more than enough of a reason for anyone to behave badly in itself, so withdrawing your affection will only make things worse.