



Disciplining Your School-Aged Child

Discipline, while often thought of as punishment, in fact, comes from the Latin word meaning to teach. During the school-aged years, (ages five through 12) the emphasis of discipline is not just on keeping your child physically safe (as in younger years), but also on developing life skills. Putting discipline in the context of teaching your child how to function appropriately and well in life—rather than simply correcting momentary behavior—allows you to use discipline as a positive teaching tool. This guide provides tips on using discipline successfully and how to handle instances when your child breaks the rules. *Note*—This guide is for general information only and is not intended as specific advice or recommendations.

Discipline Techniques

As your child matures during the school-aged years, he or she will be increasingly able to think in abstract terms. For example, when you ask your five-year-old to clean up his or her room, you'll probably have to be specific about your expectations (e.g., "Put your toys in the chest; put your books on the shelf"). When you tell your nine-year-old to clean up, you can probably assume he or she realizes you mean a general straightening up. By age 11 or 12, your child will probably understand that cleaning up involves organization along with neatness—even if he or she does not necessarily follow through on that particular chore. But, the basic guidelines of discipline do not change with your child's age. The following principles remain constant and can help you assure successful discipline with children of any age:

- Establish limits.** Children of all ages need limits. Although your child may protest, establishing limits helps children feel safe and sets the parameters of acceptable behavior. The limits you establish for your child will need to change, of course, as your child matures and develops the ability to monitor his or her own actions. For example, an eight-year-old needs to be told how far away he or she can go on his or her bike, while a 12-year-old probably has the experience to make that decision for him or herself.
- Be consistent.** If you set a rule, be prepared to stick to it and follow through with the consequences for breaking it. Children often will try to get a parent to back down, and once your child succeeds, you'll find it more difficult to enforce the rule next time. If you do decide to change a rule, for example, letting your child stay up past bedtime on a particular night, be clear that you are bending the rule just this one time. Otherwise, your child will assume he or she can break the rule again.
- Make room for obedience.** As children get older and more involved in individual activities, they may become more reluctant to drop what they're doing and go to bed, wash their hands, or come to dinner. Make it easier on both of you by following a routine. For example, give a warning ("In five minutes ..."); give a reminder ("It's just about time ..."); and make a statement ("The time has come ...").
- Choose your battles.** Overreacting to minor issues shifts the focus away from what really matters and makes others seem less important. For example, if your child forgets to take out the trash, most likely it wouldn't require the same response as breaking another more serious rule, such as hitting a sibling.
- Stay positive.** Negative techniques—belittling or sarcastic remarks, name-calling, and physical punishment of any kind—denies children the "learning" aspect of discipline and robs them of feeling good about themselves.

- **Foster cooperation.** Although you determine the rules, allowing your child to have some input—even if it’s just listening to his or her thoughts on the matter—gives your child a sense of importance and involvement in the rules. Remember to acknowledge your child’s cooperation with a thank you, even though the behavior may be expected.
- **Use positive reinforcement.** It is important to discipline your child in a way that teaches responsibility and self-control. For example, statements such as, “After you finish your homework, we can shoot baskets or play checkers,” are more effective than, “If you don’t get your homework done, we’re not playing any games tonight.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly opposes the use of physical punishment. Spanking has negative consequences, including increased aggression in school-aged children and teaching poor conflict resolution skills—and has not been shown to be any more effective than other forms of discipline. If you ever feel like you want to strike your child, get help from a family member, friend or professional. If your feelings of frustration seem overwhelming, talk to someone. Call the ChildHelp National Hotline at 800-4-A-CHILD for advice or referrals from trained counselors 24 hours a day.

When Your Child Breaks the Rules

When your child breaks a rule, remain calm, cooperative and consistent. If your child continually disobeys and breaks the rules on issues you consider major, such as fighting, you may need

to use a harsher punishment to get your message across. In addition, the following tips may help you enforce the rules:

- **Use appropriate punishments.** Part of setting limits is enforcing them. Instead of punishments that have no bearing on the issue, teach children to be responsible for their own behavior. For example, if your child forgets to return a library book, deduct the overdue costs from his or her allowance. On the other hand, grounding your child for a week will only create resentment and does not effectively teach your child that his or actions have direct consequences.
- **Follow through.** Believe in the rules you set, and once you put them in place, be consistent and stick with them. Your child may often come up with many reasons why, “this one time,” you should bend the rule. Occasionally, there may be a valid reason, but consistency is usually the best policy.
- **Be kind, but firm.** If your child repeatedly does not listen to what you are asking, get down on your child’s level, make eye contact, and tell him or her in a short, kind but firm phrase, what it is you want him or her to do. For example, “I want you to take turns playing the video game with your sister.”
- **Give choices.** Giving children a choice is an effective discipline technique. If your child is playing with food at the table ask, “Would you like to stop playing with your food or would you like to leave the table?” If your child continues to play with his or her food, make your child leave the table and explain that he or she can return when he or she can eat without playing with the food.

Coping With Lying

Lying is one of the toughest behaviors for parents to discipline. The most common reason that children lie is to avoid punishment. As children get older and become more conscious of their peers' opinions (generally after age eight or nine) they may also lie to make themselves look good, or brag or boast in order to make others jealous. Children approaching adolescence may lie to protect their privacy; they simply don't want their parents to know everything about them any longer.

Many parents are confused when their children lie—especially when they have made every effort to teach honesty as a value. If your child lies to you or you've heard him or her lying to peers or others, ask yourself the following questions to help determine why your child feels the need to lie:

- **Am I giving my child permission to tell the truth?** Don't make your child feel guilty when he or she tells the truth about something terrible. Also, keep the punishment in line with the behavior and don't be overly harsh.
- **Have my rules kept up with my child's age?** It's important to routinely modify the rules so they keep pace with your child's maturity. If you are attempting to force your 12-year-old to live under the restrictions of an eight-year-old, it sets the stage for your child to take more freedom—and lie about it. Consider re-evaluating your limits.
- **Am I setting a good example?** Even telling small lies, like pretending not to be home when a telemarketer calls or keeping incorrect change (in your favor) from the grocery store or restaurant, sends the message that lying is acceptable.

When you catch your child in a lie, don't accuse him or her. Discuss the situation calmly and ask your child why he or she felt the need to lie. The answer may surprise you, and it may tell you if changes need to be made. However, explain to your child that lying is not acceptable, and that next time he or she should talk to you about the problem before lying.

A child who suddenly starts to lie—especially if the lies are frequent, habitual, told for no apparent reason or are of some magnitude—may be experiencing a serious problem. Your child may be having problems with peers, or could have a learning disability, conduct disorder or other serious emotional disturbance. Talk to your child's pediatrician or a school counselor for help in handling this situation.

For more information on parenting your school-aged child, please refer to other guides in the Parenting series.

Helpful Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics

141 Northwest Point Boulevard
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1098
847-434-4000
www.aap.org

The AAP dedicates resources to the mental and social health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults. It provides parents with state of the art answers to medical and parenting concerns. The web site provides additional education, advocacy and a list of resources covering a wide variety of child care issues. Parents can also call, write or e-mail the AAP for information on services or to order publications.

The National Parenting Center

www.tnpc.com

This web site offers online articles written by parenting authorities, live chat and a list of book reviews and related web sites. Topics addressed include body image, communication, drug use, sex, suicide, education and family relationships. Members receive a monthly newsletter.

Family Education Network

www.familyeducation.com

This web site offers message boards, as well as tips and articles on a variety of family subjects, including advice from parenting, health and medical experts on school violence, education, values, discipline, date rape, sex education and more. It also provides links to related web sites.

This publication is for general informational purposes only and is not intended to provide any reader with specific authority, advice or recommendations.

Copyright © 2011 LifeCare®, Inc. All rights reserved. LifeCare®, Inc. is the worldwide provider of Life Event Management® Services

#7519_DisciplineSchoolage_FOH_1011

