

Child Behavior: What Parents Can Do to Change Their Child's Behavior

What is normal behavior for a child?

Normal behavior in children depends on the child's age, personality, and physical and emotional development. A child's behavior may be a problem if it doesn't match the expectations of the family or if it is disruptive. Normal or "good" behavior is usually determined by whether it's socially, culturally and developmentally appropriate. Knowing what to expect from your child at each age will help you decide whether his or her behavior is normal.

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What can I do to change my child's behavior?

Children tend to continue a behavior when it is rewarded and stop a behavior when it is ignored. Consistency in your reaction to a behavior is important because rewarding and punishing the same behavior at different times confuses your child. When you think your child's behavior might be a problem, you have 3 choices:

- Decide that the behavior is not a problem because it's appropriate to the child's age and stage of development.
- Attempt to stop the behavior, either by ignoring it or by punishing it.
- Introduce a new behavior that you prefer and reinforce it by rewarding your child.

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How do I stop misbehavior?

The best way to stop unwanted behavior is to ignore it. This way works best over a period of time. When you want the behavior to stop immediately, you can use the time-out method.

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How do I use the time-out method?

Decide ahead of time the behaviors that will result in a time-out (usually tantrums, or aggressive or dangerous behavior). Choose a time-out place that is uninteresting for the child and not frightening, such as a chair, corner or playpen. When you're away from home, consider using a car or a nearby seating area as a time-out place.

When the unacceptable behavior occurs, tell the child the behavior is unacceptable and give a warning that you will put him or her in time-out if the behavior doesn't stop. Remain calm and don't look angry. If your child goes on misbehaving, calmly take him or her to the time-out area.

If possible, keep track of how long your child's been in time-out. Set a timer so your child will know when time-out is over. Time-out should be brief (generally 1 minute for each year of age), and should begin immediately after reaching the time-out place or after the child calms down. You should stay within sight or earshot of the child, but don't talk to him or her. If the child leaves the time-out area, gently return him or her to the area and consider resetting the timer. When the time-out is over, let the child leave the time-

out place. Don't discuss the bad behavior, but look for ways to reward and reinforce good behavior later on.

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How do I encourage a new, desired behavior?

One way to encourage good behavior is to use a reward system. Children who learn that bad behavior is not tolerated and that good behavior is rewarded are learning skills that will last them a lifetime. This works best in children older than 2 years of age. It can take up to 2 months to work. Being patient and keeping a diary of behavior can be helpful to parents.

Choose 1 to 2 behaviors you would like to change (for example, bedtime habits, tooth brushing or picking up toys). Choose a reward your child would enjoy. Examples of good rewards are an extra bedtime story, delaying bedtime by half an hour, a preferred snack or, for older children, earning points toward a special toy, a privilege or a small amount of money.

Explain the desired behavior and the reward to the child. For example, "If you get into your pajamas and brush your teeth before this TV show is over, you can stay up a half hour later." Request the behavior only one time. If the child does what you ask, give the reward. You can help the child if necessary but don't get too involved. Because any attention from parents, even negative attention, is so rewarding to children, they may prefer to have parental attention instead of a reward at first. Transition statements, such as, "In 5 minutes, play time will be over," are helpful when you are teaching your child new behaviors.

This system helps you avoid power struggles with your child. However, your child is not punished if he or she chooses not to behave as you ask; he or she simply does not get the reward.

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What are some good ways to reward my child?

Beat the Clock (good method for a dawdling child)

Ask the child to do a task. Set a timer. If the task is done before the timer rings, your child gets a reward. To decide the amount of time to give the child, figure out your child's "best time" to do that task and add 5 minutes.

The Good Behavior Game (good for teaching a new behavior)

Write a short list of good behaviors on a chart and mark the chart with a star each time you see the good behavior. After your child has earned a small number of stars (depending on the child's age), give him or her a reward.

Good Marks/Bad Marks (best method for difficult, highly active children)

In a short time (about an hour) put a mark on a chart or on your child's hand each time you see him or her performing a good behavior. For example, if you see your child playing quietly, solving a problem without fighting, picking up toys or reading a book, you would mark the chart. After a certain number of marks, give your child a reward. You can also make negative marks each time a bad behavior occurs. If you do this, only give your child a reward if there are more positive marks than negative marks.

Developing Quiet Time (often useful when you're making supper)

Ask your child to play quietly alone or with a sibling for a short time (maybe 30 minutes). Check on your child frequently (every 2 to 5 minutes, depending on the child's age) and give a reward or a token for each few minutes they were quiet or playing well. Gradually increase the intervals (go from checking your child's behavior every 2 to 5 minutes to checking every 30 minutes), but continue to give rewards for each time period your child was quiet or played well.

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What else can I do to help my child behave well?

Make a short list of important rules and go over them with your child. Avoid power struggles, no-win situations and extremes. When you think you've overreacted, it's better to use common sense to solve the problem, even if you have to be inconsistent with your reward or punishment method. Avoid doing this often as it may confuse your child.

Accept your child's basic personality, whether it's shy, social, talkative or active. Basic personality can be changed a little, but not very much. Try to avoid situations that can make your child cranky, such as becoming overly stimulated, tired or bored. Don't criticize your child in front of other people. Describe your child's behavior as bad, but don't label your child as bad. Praise your child often when he or she deserves it. Touch him or her affectionately and often. Children want and need attention from their parents.

Develop little routines and rituals, especially at bedtimes and meal times. Provide transition remarks (such as "In 5 minutes, we'll be eating dinner."). Allow your child choices whenever possible. For example, you can ask, "Do you want to wear your red pajamas or your blue pajamas to bed tonight?"

As children get older, they may enjoy becoming involved in household rule making. Don't debate the rules at the time of misbehavior, but invite your child to participate in rule making at another time.

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