



PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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What Is The Best Way To Discipline My Child?

By Jacqueline B. Sallade, Ed.D.

Parents who love their children too much to let them get away with destructive, unacceptable behavior are advised to use *assertive discipline*. Assertive parents state expectations directly, and show children they are willing and ready to provide both consistent negative and positive consequences for behavior. They don't allow their children to take advantage of them, nor do they put children down with hostile statements or severe punishments.

Critical phrases such as "you dummy," or "you never do anything right" only do harm, and work to teach children that they are no good, or inadequate. Even when you think you're being funny, with remarks like, "Where were you when the brains were passed out?" you are only teaching children to give up trying, and to feel badly about themselves. Rejecting statements, such as "get out of the house," or "shut up" only teach feelings of insecurity and contribute to a child's poor self-image.

Instead, positive messages and supportive language give children a sense of security, self-worth, and teach them that, with practice, they can accomplish anything.

The assertive parents state what the rules are, and what the consequences are for breaking those rules – and then follows through. Children do need to be disciplined; they need to learn right from wrong, and they need to feel the security of structure. For example, if children are fighting at the dinner table, the nonassertive parent might respond by asking, "When are you two ever going to stop fighting?" A hostile response would be yelling "Shut up!", showing anger with no follow-through. The assertive parent would say, "You aren't allowed to fight at the dinner table. If you do it again, you choose to finish your meal in your room" (and follows through).

When proscribing a punishment, however, parents need to be careful that the punishment isn't actually a reward. If a child enjoys being in his or her room alone, then the unacceptable behavior is reinforced if sending the child to his or her room is actually a reward. If the consequence keeps the child eager to continue the action, it should be changed.

Children learn the most from logical consequences. The logical consequence teaches a lesson by requiring the child to lose the same privilege that was abused, or to make up for the misbehavior in some way.

For example, losing TV for being late to dinner doesn't make as much sense as losing dinner, or eating partial or cold dinner. Laundry strewn all over a room could be deposited in the laundry room, remain unwashed, or be picked up by the parent for a fee. Not doing homework leads to low grades, extra homework time the next day, or homework time substituted for an enjoyed extracurricular activity. Temper tantrums, whining, arguing, and fighting prevent good companionship and might be treated by isolation, or apologizing, or doing a favor for the people insulted by the misbehavior.

The possibilities are limited only by the parent's creativity, and lead to learning better behavior.

Talk to someone who can help. If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.