

Positive Discipline

Learning to be independent is an important part of your toddler's development. Sometimes this means he'll do things that you don't like. Rather than punishing him, though, you can use positive discipline to guide him.



DID YOU KNOW

Discipline doesn't need to be negative to be effective. By **showing rather than training** your child, you can help him learn to understand his feelings and act in healthy ways. At the same time, you'll build a strong and loving bond between parent and child.



Positive Discipline vs. Punishment

What is punishment?

A focus on **training** that uses harsh consequences to make a child obey. May be physical (like spanking), verbal (like shouting) or emotional (like shaming). Punishment isn't effective and doesn't help your child develop healthy life skills.

What is positive discipline?

A focus on **showing** your child how to act in positive ways.

Positive discipline:

- is built on love and trust
- shows respect for your child and his feelings
- is fair
- suits your child's age
- is consistent
- occurs right when the problem behaviour happens
- is explained in a way the child can understand

Step 1: Set the stage for positive behaviour

You can help set your child up to behave his best – and avoid problems before they start.

Communicate with your toddler:

- Get his attention before you speak.
- Get down to his level and make eye contact.
- Use simple words to tell him what you want him to do.
- Make only 1 request at a time.
- Listen to what he's saying.
- Help him learn to name and express his feelings.
- Tell him what to do instead of what not to do: "Please ride on the sidewalk," for example, instead of "don't ride on the street."



BRAIN BUILDER

By responding to your toddler's behaviour in a warm and consistent way, you'll help build his brain to handle big emotions and make healthy decisions (see [Brain Development](#)).

Provide a safe and stimulating environment:

- Spend lots of time with your toddler doing things he likes.
- Offer interesting toys and activities. (See [Play, Toys](#))
- Childproof your home so you can say “no” less often and your toddler will be more free to explore. (See [Childproofing Your Home](#))
- Give him room to explore while supervising him closely.



TRY THIS

Set up play areas in the kitchen, living room and yard so you're always close by. Provide tools and toys for play cooking, office work and gardening. You don't need to buy fancy toys. Just use items that you have around the house.

Focus on routines:

- Keep to a schedule for naps and mealtimes.
- Follow a bedtime routine.
- Tell your toddler about any upcoming changes to the routine.
- Set limits and stick to them so he knows what's expected.
- Put healthy limits on screen time. (See [Screen Time](#))

Set a good example:

- Model sharing, taking turns and using good manners.
- Be calm and patient in dealing with him and others.

- Name your own feelings so that your toddler learns what to call them and sees how you handle them in a healthy way: “I’m feeling very frustrated. I’m going to take some deep breaths so I can calm down and think about what to do.”

Praise good behaviour:

- Focus on what he did, not on whether he’s “good” or “bad”: “How wonderful that you went pee in the potty!” for example, instead of “good boy.”
- Tell him right away when you see him behaving well: “Wow! You shared your toy with that boy so nicely. That’s hard to do and you did it!”

Use cooperation instead of control:

- Let him make simple choices, like which colour shirt to wear. Limit choices to 2, so you don't confuse him.
- When you say no, offer alternatives: “No, that paper is for Daddy, but you can play with this book.”
- Negotiate with him: “I’ll read you a story after you’ve picked up the blocks.”
- Talk about conflicts so he can learn empathy and problem-solving skills (“I can see you’re angry at Tim for taking the ball”), let him know that other children have needs, too (“Tim also wants to have a turn”), and offer solutions (“Maybe you can let him have a turn and then he’ll give you a turn”).



BRAIN BUILDER

Allowing your toddler to make simple choices gives him some control and will help him learn to think for himself.



FAMILY STORY

Once I started letting my toddler make some decisions (“Do you want to eat your carrots first or your tomatoes first?”), he was happier. And I knew I was helping him learn to be independent.

Step 2: Deal positively with problem behaviour

When your child does misbehave, try using a positive discipline strategy:

Strategy 1

Connect with him. Make eye contact and let him see that you're calm, loving and there to help him.

Strategy 2

Help him name his emotions. When your toddler learns to understand his feelings, he'll be able to deal with them better. Instead of “What’s wrong with you?” try, “I can see you’re angry. It’s normal to feel angry when we can’t do what we want. But Mommy is trying to keep you safe.”

Strategy 3

Use a “time-in” to calmly comfort your toddler in a quiet space. Remove him from the situation, listen to him and help him name his emotions and figure out another way to react. When he’s ready to return, remind him of what you just talked about.

Strategy 4

Redirect him when he’s doing something that’s okay, but the way he’s doing it isn’t. If he’s throwing a ball in the kitchen, for example, offer him some safe utensils to play with, or give him a job to do.

Strategy 5

Distract him – with a toy or a book, for example – when he’s doing something you don’t want him to do.

Strategy 6

Explain the consequences of what he’s doing. If he’s pouring out his bubble-making soap, for example, tell him, “There won’t be any bubbles left if you pour that out.” If he decides to pour it out anyway, say, “That’s too bad – the bubbles are all gone now.” He may be upset (and it’s okay to comfort him), but he’ll have learned that choices have consequences.

Strategy 7

Find a compromise that works for both of you. Of course, some things – like playing with matches – are unsafe and aren’t open for compromise. Use those times to teach, too – “I can see you’re angry. But I can’t let you do that because I love you and I want to keep you safe.”

Positive Discipline by Age

As your child grows, you’ll need to adapt the way you discipline him.

6 to 12 months

At this age, your toddler isn’t being naughty on purpose, and he’s not able to understand the consequences of his actions.

What works?

- routine – a regular schedule of rest, feeding and play
- redirecting
- distracting
- lots of quiet time spent together
- a comfort toy

What doesn’t?

- consequences

12 to 24 months

As he grows, your toddler will want to test limits, explore, and have more control. He may be demanding and easily frustrated, but he isn’t misbehaving on purpose. Safety is key; toddlers at this age should be given space to explore, but shouldn’t be left alone.

What works?

- childproofing, so you won’t need to say no as often
- supervision
- offering choices
- redirecting
- distracting

- consequences: “If you throw your food off the table, then no more food.”
- communication and empathy; helping him name his emotions and understand how his actions affect others

What doesn’t?

- time-outs – which can increase separation anxiety or fear of being abandoned

24 to 36 months

At this age, your toddler is going between independence and dependence. He may be possessive and demanding and have outbursts and temper tantrums.

What works?

- connection and empathy; helping him name his emotions and understand how his actions affect others
- patience
- childproofing
- routine
- supervision
- setting limits
- offering choices
- redirecting
- consequences
- distracting
- time-ins that are short, boring and start right away