
Guidance Techniques That Work

What's the most challenging aspect of caring for children? Many caregivers and teachers say "discipline."

Actually, the word *discipline* is off target. *Guidance* is a more accurate term. As caregivers and teachers, we *guide* children's behavior. We teach them acceptable behavior and guide them to develop self-control. The goal is that children learn to make good decisions about how to act in specific situations.

Here are some tried-and-true guidance techniques that help children achieve that goal.

Focus on "Do's" Instead of "Don'ts."

Listen to how you speak to children. If you hear the words *don't*, *stop*, or *quit* before your directions to children, try to rephrase your words to tell children what to do instead of what not to do. Telling children what not to do doesn't give them any information on the correct way to behave. Translating your "don'ts" into "do's" gives children clear guidance on what you expect.

Don'ts

- Stop running in the hall.
- Don't squeeze the kitten.
- Quit whining.
- Don't climb on that counter.

Do's

Walk in the hall, please. You can run when we go outdoors.
Pat the kitten gently with your hand flat and loose.
Tell me about the problem with words.
In our classroom, feet stay on the floor.

Build Confidence.

Help children feel that they are capable, worthwhile, and able to do things. Feeling dignity and confidence enables children to try new things and approach new experiences with confidence. Ridicule, sarcasm, and belittling comments destroy confidence. Guide children with constructive, clear, and supportive words.

Example	Destructive comment	Constructive guidance
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jenny spills paint.	Can't you do anything right?	It's hard to walk without spilling. Next time, put a paper towel under the can to catch the spills.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Harry has trouble pedaling his tricycle.	If you'd just listen to me.	On the playground, we have gravel, grass, and the path. Decide which is best for riding your bike.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Four-year-old Jose has wet his pants.	You are such a baby. Shame on you.	Accidents sometimes happen. Get your dry clothes and go to the bathroom to change. I'll make sure you have time to finish your painting when you get done.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May's block tower topples.	I told you it wouldn't work.	Constructing tall towers is really hard. What do you think you could do to make your building sturdier?

Change the Environment to Promote Behavior Changes.

Wise caregivers look for the causes of misbehavior. Are there squabbles over too few toys? Are children climbing because materials are out of reach? Are children whiny and cranky because meals and naptimes are too late? Consider changes in the environment that can make you less irritated and the children less frustrated.

Example	Old environment	New environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Toddler Hannah spills her milk—every day.	Hannah uses a tall, narrow plastic cup.	Hannah uses a heavy, broad-bottomed cup.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Carlos and Sam fight over blocks.	There are 10 cardboard stacking blocks.	There are 40 blocks in a variety of shapes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Milton can't find his shoes.	There is one jumbled shelf unit for children's items.	Each child has a labeled hook and cubby for storing personal items.



Offer Choices—and Be Ready to Accept the Decision.

Caregivers know that offering choices helps children develop independence. But conflicts can arise when you are unwilling or unable to accept the choice a child makes. In general, it's best to offer two options. If there is no choice, state your expectations simply and concretely.

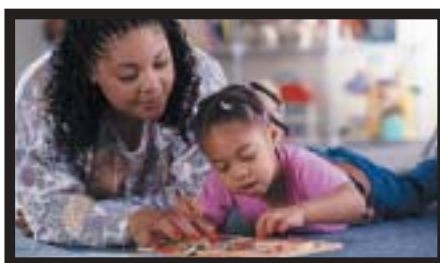
Example	Invites conflict	Builds independence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At lunchtime 	What do you want to drink? (Too many options, many of which may not be acceptable.)	Would you like milk or water with your sandwich? (Either choice is acceptable.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going outside 	It's cold today. Do you want your coat? (Child could say "No.")	Let's get our coats and go for a walk. (No choice.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Billy is wandering aimlessly in the classroom. 	What do you want to do? (Child could say "Go home," or "Go outside.")	Billy, you look like you need something to do. Would you rather paint at the easel or feed the fish?

Work With Children, Not Against Them.

Make sure your expectations are appropriate to the ages and developmental levels of the children in your care. When 3-year-old Alyssa flushes the toilet five times in a row, ask yourself: Is this misbehavior, or is this normal behavior? She may be trying to satisfy her curiosity.

Remember that infants and toddlers learn through their senses—from things that they can hear, taste, touch, smell, and see. Preschoolers follow their curiosity, need hands-on activities, and use their imagination for learning and discovery. You can minimize conflicts with children by anticipating their behaviors and preparing the environment to be safe and ready for exploration. Keep your expectations clear and reasonable—and share them with the children.

Age group	Anticipate	Prepare
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infants and toddlers 	Infants and toddlers explore with their fingers and mouths.	Baby-proof the environment and put dangerous, fragile, and breakable objects out of reach.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschoolers 	Preschoolers want to know how things work.	Offer concrete, hand-on activities with real objects that teach children about their world, like magnifying glasses, keys, and magnets.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-agers 	School-age children can think abstractly and are learning about symbols.	Plan opportunities for pretend play, board games, and word games.



Use Mistakes as Teaching Tools.

Treat mistakes, errors, and accidents as steps to learning—everyone makes them as they try new things. Share some of your mistakes—“Oops, I mixed too much water into the paint. Next time, I better measure more carefully.” In doing so, you help children know that adults too have accidents and can still learn. Build a learning environment that discourages failure and promotes success.

Example	Encourages failure	Promotes success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After a water table activity, the floor is slippery and children's clothes are wet. 	Fuss about the mess and children's carelessness—without offering solutions.	Anticipate the mess by covering the floor under the table with newspaper, having towels nearby, and providing smocks.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yetta has a hard time completing a puzzle or another project. 	Make Yetta sit in one place to “finish what you have started.”	Accommodate Yetta's needs by letting her finish the puzzle on the floor or stand to paint.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The toddler room floor is covered with toys, making Ben and Laurie reluctant to practice walking. 	Leave the disorder until naptime “since it will just get messy again” and the children can crawl to what they want.	Arrange furniture and materials so that there is always a clear path for new walkers.

Give Children Limits—and Security.

Everyone needs to have boundaries defined. You, for example, rely on speed-limit signs, price tags, and recipes to guide some of your activities. Children need to know limits and, within those limits, need the freedom to practice making appropriate decisions. They need adults to help draw the line between not enough and too much decision-making freedom.

Children also must know behavior limits will be enforced consistently—what's OK today will be OK tomorrow. Look at your own behavior for mixed messages. Did you have children finger paint with pudding yesterday and then get frustrated at lunch today when children smeared the pudding on the table?

Set behavioral limits to reflect the safety of children, the safety and well-being of others, and the protection of community property. Rules that are few, enforceable, and essential give children the freedom and responsibility to make good behavioral choices. Evaluate limits—or rules—regularly. Ask: Is the rule still necessary, or have the children outgrown it? Is the rule for my convenience alone? Does the rule restrict experimentation or keep a child from trying new things? Can the rule be enforced? Make sure you understand the reason for the rule—the children will surely ask for it.

Example	Invites conflict	Offers security and reassurance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the playground, you monitor 5-year-olds climbing the old oak tree. 	No climbing above that branch.	I know you want to go higher. I'll be here if you feel like you're getting into trouble.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the classroom, you use a timer to remind children to give up a place at a favorite activity. 	Because I say so.	We have this rule so that every child has a chance to play with the train. Would you like to read the train book while you wait?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At naptime, you help children settle on their mats. 	Go to sleep. Close your eyes right now and quit wiggling.	Sometimes it's hard to sleep. Would you like to choose a book to look at during rest time?

Use Logical Consequences.

Respond to inappropriate behavior with logical consequences—the natural result of a particular behavior. A logical consequence for an adult, for example, may be a stomach ache after eating spicy food. For a child, a logical consequence may be feeling cold after going outside without a sweater.

This kind of learning goes on all the time. In some cases, we can set up a logical consequence if one doesn't occur naturally. If a 3-year-old spills milk, for example, one logical consequence is to have the child help with cleanup. The consequence is not punishment and it always relates to the original behavior. It's not logical, therefore, to deny time in the art center to a child who spills milk—the two things don't relate to each other.

The consequence must also be reasonable. If a child's behavior poses danger—picking up broken glass or running into the street, for example—stop it immediately. Avoid extremes. If 9-year-old Josh breaks a baseball bat by swinging it against a brick wall, don't say "You can never play baseball here again." Show children that you trust them to change and learn. "Here's a glove for you to practice catching. You can try batting later this afternoon."

For a logical consequence to be effective, you must respond immediately. Make it clear that it's the behavior—not the child—that is objectionable

Example	Illogical punishment	Logical consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benny runs on the playground and knocks Jena over. 	Make Benny sit in the sandbox for the rest of outdoor time. (Not related.)	Have Benny help Jena up and walk with her to clean her hands and knees.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Toddler Mike scribbles on a wall with crayon. 	Remove crayons from the classroom for six weeks.	Help Mike scrub off the wall with a soapy rag.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Laura misuses a book and tears several pages. 	Take the book away from Laura and tell her she has ruined it. (Not related.)	Show Laura how to use tape to repair the book.

Set an Example.

Children learn by watching you. They observe your interactions with children and other adults and are likely to model their behavior on yours. For example, if you consistently talk to children rudely in a loud voice, you're teaching them that this is the way to treat others. If you tell the director that you are out of glue and then produce a hidden bottle from the closet, you'll have a difficult time convincing children that it's not right to lie.

Instead, show concern for others, work out conflicts, and respect the dignity of others—both adults and children. In this way, you model behaviors children need to learn for their social and emotional success.

Example	Negative role model	Positive role model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At lunchtime 	You watch the children eat their lunch while you have a snack of soda and chips.	You sit with the children and model sound nutritious and social mealtime habits.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On the playground 	You scream across the yard to tell Hank his dad is ready to go home.	You wave to Hank's dad, walk across the yard to tell Hank it's time to leave for the day, and help Hank say goodbye to his friends.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the art center 	Mirabelle spatters paint on the floor and wall. You tell her that it doesn't matter because the custodian is paid to clean up.	You let Mirabelle get the sponge and help her wipe down the wall and floor. When she's finished, you congratulate her for helping make the classroom a pleasant place to work and play.

Tips for Handling Common Behaviors*

The child	It may mean the child	So don't	Instead try to
Becomes angry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not feel successful with an important task. Has been told stop, no, and don't too many times. Is being forced to do something. Feels frustrated by too many demands from adults. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Become angry. Allow an out-of-control tantrum. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remember anger is normal and sometimes appropriate. Evaluate and modify the environment to minimize frustration. Help the child express anger in ways that don't hurt anyone. Provide an outlet for strong emotions.
Won't share.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is too young (under 3 years) to understand sharing. Needs experience and guidance in owning and sharing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Snatch an object from the child. Scold the child. Say you don't like the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help the child feel more secure. Teach problem-solving skills. Provide duplicate toys and materials.
Bites other children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is teething. Is using the mouth for learning. Communicates through biting rather than words. Doesn't understand that biting hurts. Feels frustrated but hasn't learned more appropriate coping skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bite the child back. Encourage biting back. Make the child bite soap. Force the child to say, "I'm sorry." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide toddlers with alternative and soothing objects to bite. Supervise closely to prevent biting. Help children develop other communication skills. Evaluate and modify schedule, environment, or materials to reduce children's stress. Comfort victims. Teach children that biting hurts. Share information with parents, stressing how typical biting is.
Is jealous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feels replaced by a new person in the family. Has been unfairly compared with others. Has been treated unfairly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shame the child. Ignore the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide warmth, love, and understanding. Discuss the child's feeling one-on-one. Help children feel competent and successful with tasks. Make available books that deal with jealousy.
Uses foul language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't know any better. Is imitating someone. Is trying something new. Is trying to get your attention. Is letting off steam. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show shock or embarrassment. Get excited. Over-react. Wash out the child's mouth with soap. Put hot pepper on the child's tongue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignore the incident. Offer a substitute word. Teach children new, extra-long words. Evaluate and modify materials to be stimulating but not overwhelming.

Tips for Handling Common Behaviors*

The child	It may mean the child	So don't	Instead try to
Hurts you or other children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is too young to understand the pain. • Is inexperienced in social relationships. • Is angry. • Is frustrated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get angry. • Hurt the child. • Force the child to say, "I'm sorry." • Say you don't like the child. • Ignore the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend the hurt person first and involve the child who did the hurt in the comforting. • Quietly separate the children. • Divert the children's attention. • Take away hurting objects—calmly and firmly. • Offer different ways to express feelings.
Destroys materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is curious about how things work. • Does not understand the correct way to use the materials. • Has had an accident. • Feels excited or angry. • Finds the materials too difficult or frustrating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scold, yell, or shout. • Tell the child "You're bad." • Hurt the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach and model the proper ways to handle materials. • Examine fragile items with the child. • Remove broken materials from the area. • Teach the difference between valued and throw-away items. • Involve the child in repair work.
Refuses to eat.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is showing a normal decrease in appetite. • Is not hungry. • Does not feel well. • Dislikes a particular food, flavor, or texture. • Is imitating someone. • Is trying to be independent. • Is trying to get attention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a scene. • Reward or bribe the child. • Threaten the child. • Scold the child. • Force the child to eat. • Withhold other foods or drink. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain calm and casual. • Make food interesting and attractive. • Introduce new foods a little at a time. • Help children learn to serve and feed themselves. • Serve small portions. • Involve children in food preparation.
Demands attention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is tired, hungry, or not feeling well. • Feels left out, insecure, or unloved. • Really likes you and is jealous of the attention you give other children. • Hasn't yet learned to play creatively and independently. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore or isolate the child. • Shame the child. • Scold or punish the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend to the child's physical needs. • Show interest in the child's ideas and discoveries. • Offer interesting activities for the child to do with other children. • Recognize the child's efforts and successes.

* Adapted from "Tips for Handling Common Situations With Children," *Texas Child Care*, Winter 1983.

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