



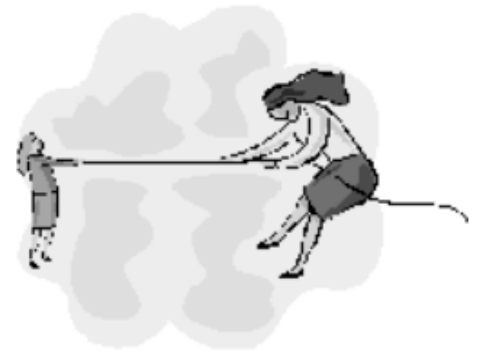
---

---

# Single Parenting: Disciplining Children

Maria staggers in the door with the last bag of groceries after a long day at work. She starts thinking about what to make for dinner. The phone rings just as her 13-year-old daughter spills her soda all over the mail. Roberto, the 4-year-old, starts yelling, running around the kitchen, and hitting his sister. What should Maria do?

We all have days when nothing seems to go smoothly. It would be easy for Maria to get angry and yell at her children. Yet she knows this won't make the situation better.



Sometimes it's hard to know how to discipline children. All parents wonder if they're too strict or not strict enough. You may not have disciplined your children before your divorce. Still it is now possible for you to effectively discipline your children. Think about what you want to teach your children and what they learn by watching your behavior.

## Discipline and stress

Single parents often feel overwhelmed. They have a lot of responsibility with the added stress of not having a partner to talk to. Studies show that single parents have increased stresses related to budgeting their money, meeting their children's needs, trying to do too many things, balancing a social life with work and home responsibilities, and maintaining relationships with former spouses or partners.

When stress piles up, it's hard to cope with discipline problems. There's not enough time in the day! How can you possibly take time to think about positive ways to discipline your children? On the other hand, your children's misbehavior just adds to your stress.

There are steps you can take to discipline well under stress. You can:

- decide what behavior you'll expect from your children.
- talk to them about your expectations.
- set rules for your children, with their input.
- decide, along with your children, what will happen if they break the rules.

## Discipline is teaching

How do you want your children to relate to others? How do you want your children to feel about themselves? How do you want your children to feel about responsibility? Most parents want their children to feel good about themselves, to solve problems, to get along with others, to be responsible and to avoid risky negative behavior.

## **Clarify your expectations**

As a parent, it's natural and beneficial to set rules for your children. But it's also important to think: Are my rules fair? Are my rules suitable for my children's ages?

What behavior do you expect from your child in each of the following areas? Write down what is fair to expect. Are your children able to follow through, based on their ages or developmental levels, personalities, and schedules?

- personal care (dressing, grooming, etc.)
- chores at home
- schoolwork
- bedtime and mealtime
- getting along with others

For example, your 6-year-old daughter can't lace and tie her shoes or braid her hair, but she can dress herself and comb her hair. She can set the table, feed the dog and prepare a salad. Your 15-year-old son can walk the dog, wash the dinner dishes and mow the lawn. He can't help prepare dinner because he plays sports after school.

Helping children feel successful is one of the important roles of a parent. If your children are old enough to help decide what will be expected of them, include them in making the decisions. Talk about each area so it's clear what is expected. By involving them in rule setting, they are more likely to be obedient and feel successful.

## **Set limits**

Have only a few limits. Explain why a rule is important. "If you don't go to an after school program, you're likely to get involved in risky behavior. You need adult supervision and fun activities to do while I'm working." Let children know that rules don't happen by chance. There's a reason why they're important and should be followed. Some reasons for having rules may be to keep your child and others safe, to show respect for others, and to protect property.

If your child misbehaves, ask yourself why. Does my child know the rule? Is my child having a bad day? Is my child doing what others are doing? What else is going on that might effect my child's actions?

When thinking about the results of misbehaving, ask yourself, "What can my child learn right now?" If your child colors on your papers, what would be a logical consequence or outcome? Would you take her crayons away for a day or send her to her room for an hour? Taking the crayons away and telling her you are angry is the most logical consequence. When a grade school child or teen breaks a rule, ask him or her to state the rule and the consequence.

Enforce limits firmly and consistently. If you only enforce the rules sometimes, your child won't know if you really mean what you say. A child won't learn to put his toys away if sometimes he's yelled at, sometimes nothing happens, and sometimes you put them away for him.

Focus on do's. Say things in a positive way so your child knows what to do. Instead of saying, "Don't put your coat on the floor," say, "Put your coat in the closet." Celebrate your child's successes. Give your child attention when she follows the rules, not just when she misbehaves. When your son carries the groceries and your daughter helps clean the garage, let them know how happy you are for their help. They'll feel good about themselves!

Re-evaluate limits and expect children to test limits. It's common for children to see how far they can go beyond a limit. Be calm and consistent.

### **Build your child's self-image**

How you communicate with and discipline your child are important in developing your child's self-esteem. When a child misbehaves, separate the behavior from the child and ask questions. For example say, "I'm worried that soda is all over the mail. I may not be able to read it. What should we do about it?" rather than saying "Can't you do anything without messing it up!"

Use "I" messages to help describe how the child's behavior makes you feel. This helps children see how their behavior affects others. For example say, "I feel angry that my papers are colored blue and green," rather than, "You're a bad, bad girl. You ruined my papers."

Sometimes children misbehave because they don't know how to handle their emotions. You can help your children express their feelings by talking about what they're feeling. One way to do this is to model the behavior. For example, tell your children how you felt when a car cut in front of you on the highway. Let them know you were angry or scared, but you didn't act on feelings and speed to get in front of the car. Instead you took deep breathes and counted to twenty until you calmed down.

Children need to feel important, special, and loved. Although you may feel the need to respond to your child's misbehavior, it's just as important to pay attention to behavior you approve of. Praise your children when they follow directions or clear their plates without reminders.

How will you let your child know they are special and loved? Check ideas from the following list.

- Spend time with your children.
- Tell your children you love them.
- Thank your children for helping with family tasks.
- Use kind words, be polite.
- Really listen to what your children are saying.
- Talk calmly and warmly to your children, look them in the eyes when you talk, and pay close attention to what they are saying.



### **What to do when children's behavior is disruptive**

Parents and children sometimes become locked in a cycle of conflict. The following ideas can help you avoid conflict or get you and your child out of a conflict cycle.

- Remain calm. Separate yourself from the situation for a few minutes.
- Talk about specific rules when you're both calm. Focus on one or two behaviors that are causing a problem. Discuss them with your children. If your children can read, post the rules in their room or on the refrigerator door.
- What will happen if...? Discuss the outcomes when your children don't follow the rules. Explain the consequences or outcomes in a caring voice. Make sure the consequences are fair for a child's stage of development and temperament. The consequences should be related to the misbehavior and carried out immediately following the misbehavior.

- Encourage behavior you like. Children need to know what they've done well and why it's important.
- Provide positive choices for your child. For example, "You can't go to Aunt Mary's for dinner tonight because we're having a family dinner. But after dinner you can visit her or go to dinner at her house tomorrow night."

### **What about spanking?**

Although spanking may seem to stop a misbehavior at the time, it does more harm than good. Many parents spank because they're angry, don't know what else to do or were hit as children themselves. They may think it's the only thing that works. Other forms of discipline work better.

Discipline is about teaching, and spanking doesn't teach children. It hurts children physically and emotionally. Children don't learn the right things to do, and will most likely do the same things again when you're not around. Children also learn that it's okay to hit other people, that people who love you hit you and that violence is a way to deal with problems. These are lessons most parents don't want their children to learn.

### **Things to remember**

- Find ways to calm down - no one should react when he or she feels very angry.
- Take a breather – get away for a few minutes, talk to a friend, take deep breaths, take a walk.
- Explain why you're upset or angry – use "I" statements.
- Use reasoning, and calmly enforce the consequences for breaking a rule.
- Think about what your child should learn, and remember, hitting your child only teaches him or her to hit others.
- Take a break – separate the child or yourself from the situation for a few minutes.
- Change the environment so your child avoids misbehaving.
- Ignore behaviors that are irritating but not harmful.
- Pay attention to good behavior and encourage your child.

### **Keep a positive attitude**

Don't blame yourself! Raising children is difficult, especially for a single parent with many parenting roles. Take time to see the whole picture. Think about what you want to teach your children.

Build on family strengths. Everyone benefits when you identify and build the strengths of your children and your family.

Find sources of support. Talk with a friend, another parent, a support group, a counselor or a member of the clergy. Join a parenting education class. You're not alone. Find others to talk to and share the challenges and pleasures of parenting.

#### **Sources:**

Family focus: Parenting the school age child. (2001). University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.

Hughes, R. Parenting on your own. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Cooperative Extension.

Nelson, P. Solo parenting. University of Delaware Cooperative Extension.

Youth Update c/o Search Update. (1995). Minneapolis, MN.

***Visit our website: [ceinfo.unh.edu](http://ceinfo.unh.edu)***

*UNH Cooperative Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent Federal and State laws and regulations on non-discrimination regarding age, color, handicap, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veterans status.*