

# Mom's Guide to Family Health: New Year Food and Fitness

## Six Ways to Discipline Children -- That Work!

WebMD Feature

By Joanne Barker

Reviewed By Amita Shroff, MD

It's hard to deny the importance of discipline. "Discipline has to do with civilizing your child so they can live in society," says [psychiatrist](#) Michael Brody, MD. Yet kids repeatedly test their parents' limits. When it comes to disciplining children, there is no quick fix and no magic bullet.

If you, like many parents, have tried to discipline kids who don't want to listen, this article is for you. WebMD asked [parenting](#) experts for tips on finding that nice balance between disciplining kids without being a drill sergeant or a pushover.

### Discipline Tip # 1: Reward Good Behavior

When punishment is the centerpiece of discipline, parents tend to overlook their children's best behaviors. "You'll get a lot further with positive reinforcement than negative reinforcement," says Mason Turner, MD, chief of psychiatry at Kaiser Permanente San Francisco Medical Center. Rewarding good deeds targets behaviors you want to develop in your child, not things he shouldn't be doing.

This doesn't mean you should give your child a pound of [chocolate](#) every time he picks up a paperclip. "There are grades of positive reinforcement," says Turner. "There's saying 'good job. I'm really glad you did that,' when your child cleans his room." And there are times when your child does something extraordinary that may warrant a larger reward.

### Discipline Tip # 2: Be Clear About Rules

If your rules are vague, or discussed only when one has been broken, your child will have a hard time following them. "It's up to the parent to make clear what's expected of the child and what isn't," says Brody, who chairs the Media Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Be sure to explain the rules of the house when you can speak clearly and your child is not too upset to listen.

James Sears, MD, a pediatrician in Southern California, suggests practicing discipline when it works for you. For instance, when you have 30 minutes to spare, interrupt your child's game and tell her you need help with something. If she helps, great, do a quick and easy chore together and let her go back to her game. If she throws a tantrum, you have time to deal with it. "If you do that every once in a while, your child will understand that when Mommy says I need to put my toys away, I need to do it," says Sears.

**continued...**

### Discipline Tip # 3: Neutralize Arguments

How do you deal with a child who wants to argue into submission? Steer clear of no-win arguments.

Instead, "go [brain](#) dead," advises Jim Fay, co-author of *Parenting with Love and Logic*. For instance, if your child says, "This isn't fair," say, "I know." If your child says, "All of my friends get to have this," say, "I know." Or you can use the phrase, "And what did I say?" to enforce rules you have already discussed with your child. Sometimes the less you say, the more clear your point becomes.

### Discipline Tip # 4: Buy Yourself Time

You may have read that children need to experience the consequences of their actions as soon as possible. And maybe you've heard that parents should be calm as they discipline children. In reality, you may not be able keep your cool *and* react right away.

"Buy yourself time to calm down before you deal with the situation," suggests Fay. You can tell your child, "Wow, bad decision. I need some time to figure out what I'm going to do about that." When your emotions are in check, express empathy for your child first, then deliver the consequences. Empathy gives your child room to connect his behavior to the outcome. "You don't have to get angry at kids, you don't have to yell. Just allow it to become their problem," says Fay.

#### **Discipline Tip # 5: Be Consistent About Rules**

Sometimes sticking to the rules is as challenging for parents as it is for kids. Sears sees too many parents turn the other cheek when their kids talk back or otherwise act out. "Parents just are not consistent in enforcing rules," he tells WebMD. Not enforcing your own rules puts everything you say into question. "If kids don't know what to expect from their parents, they never really know what the rules are."

You may want to back down for fear of ruining your child's fun. Keep in mind that kids benefit from limits. Rules and structure give children the security of knowing their parents are watching out for them. As kids get older, you can take a more flexible approach. Around the ages of 9 and 12, kids should get "a little leeway to test out the rules," says Brody. "But always be very careful about safety."

**continued...**

#### **Discipline Tip # 6: Model Good Behavior**

Like it or not, your children are watching you. You can dole out as much advice as you want, but your personal conduct makes a more lasting impression than your words. "The number one way human beings learn is through imitation and copy," says Fay. If you want your child to be honest, make sure you practice honesty. If you want your child to be polite, let her see your best manners, at home and in public.

The fact is, raising disciplined children is not easy. Despite your best efforts, there will always be good days and bad days. For evidence, look to the experts we interviewed for this article. Even after years of working with families, all four shared stories of their own children's meltdowns or misbehavior. "As a parent, you're constantly pushing your own limits. It's the toughest but the greatest job I've ever had," says Turner.

---

#### SOURCES:

Michael Brody, MD, psychiatrist, chair, media committee, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Mason Turner, MD, chief of psychiatry, Kaiser Permanente San Francisco Medical Center.

KidsHealth from Nemours: "Disciplining Your Child."

James Sears, MD, pediatrician, Southern California; co-author, *Father's First Steps: 25 Things Every Dad Should Know*, Harvard Common Press, 2006.

Jim Fay, educator, parenting expert; co-founder, Love and Logic; co-author, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, NavPress Publishing, 2006.

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: "Discipline."

Ask Dr. Sears: "25 Ways to Talk So Children Will Listen."

American Academy of Pediatrics: "HealthyChildren.org - Making Discipline Work."

Reviewed by Amita Shroff, MD on February 03, 2014

© 2012 WebMD, LLC. All rights reserved.

My Notes:

