

Positive Discipline

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



DID YOU KNOW?

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



Positive Discipline vs. Punishment

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 their 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

What is punishment?

A focus on **training** that uses harsh consequences to make a child obey. It 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.



Set the stage for positive behaviour

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

Communicate with your toddler:

- Get their attention before you speak.
- Get down to their level and make eye contact. Offer a gentle touch or nod.
- Make reasonable, clear rules, and tell your child why you have these rules. Keep them the same from day to day.
- Use simple words to tell them what you want them to do.
- Make only 1 request at a time.
- Listen to what they're saying.
- Help them name their feelings ("happy," "sad," "angry") and learn to express them.
- Tell them 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 their 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 they like.
- Offer interesting toys and activities. Remember – children learn when they play. (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 your child room to explore while supervising them 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 they know what's expected.
- Put healthy limits on screen time. (See [Screen Time](#))

Set a good example:

- Model sharing, taking turns and using good manners, like saying “please” and “thank you.”
- Be calm and patient in dealing with your child and others. When you're upset, it can make your child more upset.
- 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 they did, not on whether they're “good” or “bad”: “How wonderful that you went to pee in the potty!” for example, instead of “good for you.”
- Tell them right away when you see them behaving well: “Wow! You shared your toy with that child so nicely. That's hard to do and you did it!”

Use cooperation instead of control:

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



BRAIN BUILDER

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



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.



Deal positively with problem behaviour

When your child does misbehave, try using the positive discipline strategy that best suits the situation:

Strategy 1

Connect with them through a gentle nod or touch or a kind word or look. Let them see that you're calm, loving and there to help them.

Strategy 2

Help them name their emotions. When your toddler learns to understand their feelings, they'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 them from the situation, listen to them and help them name their emotions and figure out another way to react. When they’re ready to return, remind them of what you just talked about.

Strategy 4

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

Strategy 5

Distract them – with a toy or a book, for example – when they’re doing something you don’t want them to do.

Strategy 6

Explain the consequences of what they’re doing. If they’re pouring out their bubble-making soap, for example, tell them, “There won’t be any bubbles left if you pour that out.” If they decide to pour it out anyway, say, “That’s too bad – the bubbles are all gone now.” They may be upset (and it’s okay to comfort them), but they’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 them.

6 to 12 months

At this age, your toddler isn’t trying to be naughty, and they’re not able to understand the consequences of their actions.

What works?

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

What doesn’t?

- consequences

12 to 24 months

As they grow, your toddler will want to test limits, explore and have more control. They may seem demanding and be more easily frustrated, but they aren’t trying to misbehave. 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
- connecting and redirecting
- distracting
- consequences: “If you throw your food off the table, then no more food.”

- communication and empathy – helping them name their emotions and understand how their 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. They may be possessive and demanding and have outbursts and temper tantrums.

What works?

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



TRY THIS

Don’t try to reason with your toddler when they’re still very upset. Wait until they’ve calmed down enough to listen.