

How to Put an End to Difficult Behavior

Getting your 3-year-old to behave can be a challenge. The trick is consistency and learning to pick your battles. Michael Brian

Acting authoritative -- without becoming authoritarian -- isn't easy to do, especially in the heat of the moment. These techniques can help:

Pick your fights. Battle your 3-year-old over every bad behavior and you'll be at war all day. Instead, list the top few behaviors that really bother you -- because they're dangerous, uncivil, or annoying. For those you deem forbidden -- riding a tricycle in the street or leaving the house without an adult, for example -- set clear, specific rules and logical consequences. Biting back, for example, is not a logical consequence for a child who bites because it simply teaches that the bigger person gets to bite. A reminder of why it's not nice to bite and a brief time-out in a boring place make more sense. Always follow through on whatever discipline you decide on. Lack of consistency confuses kids and promotes rebellion.

For less-serious misconduct -- lying, not sharing, swearing -- develop an overall policy, but deal with each case as it arises. When your child is feeling tired, sick, or hungry or is facing stress (from a move or a divorce, for example), you need to be flexible.

Practice prevention. Use your knowledge of your child to head off needless blowups. If he likes to clean out the kitchen cupboards while you're cooking breakfast every morning--and it drives you crazy--buy cabinet locks; if he can't keep his hands off the VCR, put it far out of reach. Childproofing works wonders in reducing family feuds.

Also, plan ahead. If your child tends to be happy and energetic in the morning but is tired and grumpy after lunch, schedule trips to the store and visits to the doctor for when she's at her best. Prepare her for any new experiences, and explain how you expect her to act. To stave off boredom, pack a bag of toys or snacks. Also prepare her for shifting activities: "In a few minutes we'll need to pick up the toys and get ready to go home." The better prepared a child feels, the less likely she is to make a fuss.

When your child is defiant, it can be hard to know what the consequences should be. Here are which punishments are appropriate and whether you should always enforce them.

Stay calm. If you cannot avoid bad behavior, then face it calmly. Try to use a quiet, unruffled tone of voice and words that are neutral and positive. And keep in mind that suggestions ("Why don't you wash your hands now so you'll be all set to eat when supper's on the table?") promote far more cooperation than commands ("Go wash your hands at once!") or criticism ("Your hands and face are really dirty!").

It also helps to turn "you" statements into "I" messages. Instead of saying, "You're so selfish that you won't even share your toys with your best friend," try "I like it better when I see kids sharing their toys." Another good technique is to focus on do's rather than don'ts. If you tell a 3-year-old that he can't leave his trike in the hallway, he may want to argue. A better approach: "If you move your trike out to the porch, it won't get kicked and scratched so much."

Finally, make sure your tone and words do not imply that you no longer love your child. "I really can't stand it when you act like that" sounds final; "I don't like it when you try to pull cans from the store shelves," however, shows your child that it's one specific behavior -- not the whole person -- that you dislike.

Listen carefully. Kids feel better when they know they have been heard, so whenever possible, repeat your child's concerns. If she's whining in the grocery store because you won't let her open the cookies, say something like: "It sounds like you're mad at me because I won't let you open the cookies until we get home. I'm sorry you feel that way, but the store won't let us open things until they're paid for. That's its policy." This won't satisfy her urge, but it will reduce her anger and defuse the conflict.

Explain your rules. It is rarely obvious to a 3-year-old why he should stop doing something he finds fun -- like biting, hitting, or grabbing toys from other children. Teach him empathy instead: "When you bite or hit people, it hurts them"; "When you grab toys away from other kids, they feel sad because they still want to play with those toys." This helps your child see that his behavior directly affects other people and trains him to think about consequences first.

Offer choices. When a child refuses to do -- or stop doing -- something, the real issue is usually control: You've got it; she wants it. So, whenever possible, give your preschooler some control by offering a limited set of choices. Rather than commanding her to clean up her room, ask her, "Which would you like to pick up first, your books or your blocks?" Be sure the choices are limited, specific, and acceptable to you, however. "Where do you want to start?" may be overwhelming to your child, and a choice that's not acceptable to you will only amplify the conflict.

Provide alternatives. When you want your child to stop doing something, offer alternative ways for him to express his feelings: say, hitting a pillow or banging with a toy hammer. He needs to learn that while his emotions and impulses are acceptable, certain ways of expressing them are not. Also, encourage your child to think up his own options. For instance, you could ask: "What do you think you could do to get Tiffany to share that toy with

you?" Even 3-year-olds can learn to solve problems themselves. The trick is to listen to their ideas with an open mind. Don't shoot down anything, but do talk about the consequences before a decision is made.

Use time-out. For moments when reasoning, alternatives, and calmness have no impact, use time-outs: Send your child to a dull place to sit for a brief period and pull herself together. This gives you both a chance to cool down and sends the message that negative behavior will not get your attention. The less you reward any negative behavior with attention, the less your child will use that behavior to get her way.

Admit your mistakes. Be sure you let your child know when you've goofed by apologizing and explaining why you acted the way you did. This will teach him that it's okay to be imperfect.

Bestow rewards. It's highly unlikely that your child will always do whatever you say. If that happened, you'd have to think about what might be wrong with her! Normal kids resist control, and they know when you are asking them to do something they don't want to do. They then feel justified in resisting you. In cases in which they do behave appropriately, a prize is like a spoonful of sugar: It helps the medicine go down.

Judicious use of special treats and prizes is just one more way to show your child you're aware and respectful of his feelings. This, more than anything, gives credibility to your discipline demands.

By the editors of Child magazine, Photo by Ericka McConnell