

Breaking Your Bad Discipline Habits

Replace the tactics that don't work with ones that do

Nagging

We all nag. And we all know how fruitless it is. Either your child resorts to fibbing or he learns to tune you out.

Try this instead: Use eye contact and state your expectations as calmly as possible. Fewer words are better. Instead of saying, "How many times do I have to tell you not to eat in the living room?" say, "No eating in the living room." And try not to load up on commands. It's better for him to do one thing (put on his shoes) than hear a whole string of orders.

Yelling

What's true of nagging is doubly true of yelling -- we all do it, and we all feel guilty every time we do. Even if it does occasionally get results, it just teaches your child that it's OK to raise his voice when he's angry.

Try this instead: A proper scolding names the misbehavior at hand. Your child really does need to know what he's done wrong, as long as you don't raise your voice or lose your temper.

Turning requests into questions

It's a hard habit to break, especially after years of asking your young child rhetorical questions as a way of making conversation -- "How about a little breakfast now? Doesn't that sound good?"

Try this instead: State, don't ask. Remember to frame your expectations in a polite, respectful manner by adding "please" and "thank you": "I need you to turn off the TV now and start getting ready, please."

Issuing empty warnings

A good warning can be an effective discipline strategy. The problem comes when you threaten in anger, grossly exaggerate ("If you do that again, I'm not taking you outside all day"), or fail to be specific ("You'll be sorry!").

Try this instead: Make your warnings more specific and immediate. ("I'm warning you. If you don't give that toy back to your sister, I'm going to have to put you in time-out.") Use a calm, firm tone of voice that makes it clear you're in control.

Apologizing too much

Saying you are sorry when you've made a mistake is an act that strengthens your bond with your kids. But even a young child can sense when your apology isn't heartfelt, and constantly saying sorry for the same mistake wears thin.

Try this instead: Make a genuine effort to cut back on, for instance, yelling. There are actually two parts to an apology -- your words and your actions.

Giving the cold shoulder

While removing a privilege can be an effective penalty, turning away from your child when she wants to kiss and make up or giving her the silent treatment after she's misbehaved can make her feel unworthy of your love and affection.

Try this instead: Tell your child how upset you are. Just do it calmly without making her feel rejected. Your aim is to make it clear that it's the behavior that's driving you crazy, not her.