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Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior and Developing Self-Discipline: Helping Handout for Home

GEORGE G. BEAR

INTRODUCTION

When thinking of discipline, it is important to keep in mind that discipline has two major aims (Bear, 2005): managing or correcting a child's behavior, and developing self-discipline. The first aim is more short-term than the second aim, primarily concerning practices for preventing and correcting misbehavior. These practices include closely monitoring your child's behavior, developing and maintaining a close and supportive relationship, praising and rewarding desired behavior, and punishing undesired behavior. The second aim—developing self-discipline—is more long-term. Self-discipline refers to self-regulation or self-control: inhibiting misbehavior willingly, not grudgingly and out of fear of punishment, and taking responsibility for one's actions. Perhaps the most important measure of success as a parent is how your child acts when you are *not* present, including when he or she becomes an adult. Developing self-discipline includes many of the same practices as preventing and correcting misbehavior, but it also includes much more, such as teaching empathy, responsible decision making, and emotional regulation.

As seen in its two aims, *discipline* is not the same as *punishment*. To be sure, effective discipline often includes the use of punishment—particularly nonphysical types of punishment such as taking away privileges—when correcting misbehavior. Research clearly supports use of punishment as both a deterrent and a corrective technique (Bandura, 1986). But if one's aim is much more than simply preventing and correcting misbehavior, and includes developing self-discipline, it's important to think of discipline and punishment as not being one and the same. Unless combined with other positive techniques of discipline, punishment is insufficient for preventing misbehavior and developing self-discipline.

This handout presents a combination of strategies and techniques, both positive and punitive, for preventing and correcting general misbehavior, while also developing self-discipline. For specific behavior problems, such as lying, stealing, bullying, and defiance, please see handouts specific to those problem behaviors, listed later under Related Helping Handouts.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN PREVENTING AND CORRECTING MISBEHAVIOR AND DEVELOPING SELF-DISCIPLINE

There is a lot to consider when thinking about how best to prevent and correct misbehavior and develop self-discipline. In this section, two major considerations are discussed: (a) general approaches to parenting and (b) other factors that determine misbehavior.

General Approaches to Parenting

Decades of research have identified four general approaches to parenting, or child-rearing: permissive, uninvolved or neglectful, authoritarian, and

authoritative (Baumrind, 2013). Which approach a parent uses has a profound influence on a child's behavior—both misbehavior and good behavior. The four approaches differ from one another in the extent to which each includes what is referred to as *responsiveness* and *demandingness*.

Responsiveness refers to caring, warmth, respect, and responsiveness to a child's psychological needs, especially the needs to have autonomy, to feel competent, to feel loved, and to have a sense of social belonging. Demandingness refers to having high, yet realistic, academic and behavioral expectations, and closely supervising and monitoring a child's behavior. As one might guess, the worst style of discipline is the uninvolved or neglectful style, in which parents are not responsive to their children's needs. They fail to communicate that they care, and also place few, if any, demands on their children, especially demands that they follow through with. The permissive style also lacks demandingness, but at least parents who follow this approach communicate that they care. In contrast, the authoritarian approach is high in demandingness, but low in responsiveness: Authoritarian parents are strict, placing high expectations and demands on children, and often with harsh consequences if the expectations aren't met. They also lack in demonstrating responsiveness. The authoritative approach is the best approach, as it is high in both responsiveness and demandingness. It is associated with a number of positive outcomes: Children of authoritative parents tend to have fewer behavioral and mental health problems, are more socially accepted, experience greater academic success, and are more independent and self-disciplined (Baumrind, 2013).

Other Contributing Factors

The greatest determinant of present and future behavior is what children learn at home from parenting, or child-rearing, and especially from the style of discipline used. Nevertheless, all children misbehave, including those of the best authoritative parents. Children differ greatly, however, in how often they misbehave, the severity of their misbehavior, and *why* they misbehave. For example, at one time or another nearly all children lie, steal (e.g., including from a sibling), and disobey rules. Fortunately, most do so infrequently and refrain from the most serious acts of misbehavior, such as criminal offenses.

Many factors determine the frequency and severity of misbehavior, ranging from genetics to the child's environment. In most cases of misbehavior a combination of factors is involved. For example, peer pressure might greatly influence stealing, but how a child reacts to peer pressure is also often influenced by a child's temperament (e.g., impulsivity, empathy), what the child was taught about peer pressure and stealing, who the peers are, expectations and fear of getting caught, anticipation of guilt, what is to be stolen, and so forth. To understand a child's misbehavior, it often helps to consider all likely factors. However, for purposes of doing something about the misbehavior—correcting it and preventing it from reoccurring—the most important step is to identify factors that you and the child are likely to be able to change. Such factors might lie within the child or within the child's environment. Within-child factors include the presence or lack of important social and emotional skills, such as social problem-solving skills, assumption of responsibility, impulse control, empathy, and social awareness.

Environmental factors that parents are likely to alter include monitoring and supervision, the peers with whom their child associates, where their child is, and the models of behavior and guidance provided. Often, it makes sense to try to address as many factors influencing the misbehavior as feasible. Of course, it's not always possible to identify what is contributing to the misbehavior or to change the factors you identify. Keep in mind, however, that identifying the cause of misbehavior, although often helpful, is not always necessary, because many of the strategies and techniques recommended in this handout are often effective regardless of the cause of the misbehavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are consistent with an authoritative approach to discipline. They are divided into two general sections: (a) preventing misbehavior and (b) responding to misbehavior. Recommendations within both sections emphasize both managing your child's behavior and developing self-discipline (see also Bear & Manning, 2014).

Preventing Misbehavior

The recommendations in this section are meant to be used in combination. No one recommendation used alone is likely to be sufficient for preventing misbehavior.

1. ***Be responsive to your child's needs.*** This approach includes developing social and emotional skills,

especially those associated with self-discipline, that help prevent misbehavior and promote desired behaviors. Specific recommendations for developing social and emotional skills can be found in *Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home*.

Being responsive to your child's needs also includes conveying that you care about and love your child regardless of his or her behavior—even when your child's behavior is at its worst. At those times you should communicate that you do *not* approve of your child's present behavior but you continue to love him or her. This is critical to helping children maintain a healthy self-concept and self-esteem—a feeling that someone always loves them. It's also important for promoting attachment to the parent, as well as to others—providing a secure base to which to return in times of need and for support. There are many other ways responsiveness should be communicated, such as showing a sincere interest in how your child feels, your child's interests, and the problems he or she faces, and providing emotional and social support when needed.

2. ***Be demanding.*** Authoritative parents set high standards and hold high expectations; enforce rules and standards in a firm, fair, and consistent manner; and promote autonomy by encouraging their children's active participation in decisions regarding their behavior and holding them responsible for their decisions and actions. Although authoritative parents use punishment when needed, they focus more on the use of positive and proactive techniques for increasing the likelihood that their children will exhibit appropriate behavior and do so willingly rather than grudgingly—because they want to, and not because they feel like they have to. Make sure your expectations and standards for improvement are clear, reasonable, and realistic. However, be careful not to be overdemanding, or acting like a helicopter parent who is constantly hovering over their child. Recognize that your expectations will not always be met, and that minor misbehavior is developmentally normal for children and adolescents. Do not expect perfect behavior.
3. ***Catch your child being good!*** As a general rule of thumb, try to praise or reward your child at least three to five times for every one negative correction. See *Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home* for specific recommendations on using praise and rewards to increase desired behaviors and to help develop self-discipline.
4. ***Be sure to spend quality time with your child.*** A strong parent–child relationship not only makes your child feel loved and supported, but also helps prevent many behavior problems, and especially the more serious ones.
5. ***Help structure and guide how your child should be spending his or her time.*** Many behavior problems can be prevented by providing guidance and structure, such as by keeping your child busy with planned activities, ranging from participation in sports and clubs to playing family games or watching a movie or reading together. Obviously, less guidance and structure should be given as your child grows older, and some children will need more than others, regardless of age. Nevertheless, at the very least, every parent should monitor their child's behavior and know where their children are and what they should be doing.
6. ***Be consistent and fair.*** Correcting misbehavior one time and ignoring it the next time can be as harmful as never correcting it. The same consequences should be used when the same behavior is exhibited under the same circumstances.
7. ***Don't forget that children learn by observing others.*** Children of all ages learn a lot—both good and bad—by watching others, especially their parents and siblings. Thus, expect your child to behave the same as you. If you're often angry, impulsive, impolite, and unfair, and often challenge or disobey rules and authority, expect the same of your child. Likewise, if you are patient, kind, caring, fair, and a good problem-solver, your child is likely to be the same. Thus, it is important that you model the behaviors you desire. It's also important that you provide models of others who demonstrate the behaviors you value and desire, while avoiding models of undesired behavior. This would include models observed in peers, videos, and movies, as well as those heard in music.
8. ***View disciplinary encounters as educational opportunities to teach appropriate behavior and develop self-discipline.*** Do not view them as situations in which the child necessarily has to be punished and it's your duty to do so. Clearly, some form of punishment as a consequence of

the misbehavior might be appropriate, but try to teach your child not only that the misbehavior leads to negative consequences but also, and much more importantly, why the misbehavior is being punished—why it is harmful, hurtful, or inappropriate. Also, use the occasion as an educational opportunity for your child to learn or practice skills that are likely to prevent the misbehavior from reoccurring. For example, ask your child to show you what he or she might do next time a similar situation occurs and to explain why. Emphasize the importance of those skills and of assuming responsibility for one's behavior.

9. ***Be aware of the limitations of punishment.*** The use of punishment is limited, especially when punishment is harsh or used frequently and when it is not used in combination with more positive forms of discipline. Among the limitations are the following:
   - It teaches children what *not to do*, but it doesn't teach them what they *should do* instead.
   - It often produces undesirable side effects, such as children becoming angry, retaliating, or avoiding or disliking the person who does the punishing. Typically, these effects are temporary, but when punishment is overly harsh or used too often, the effects are likely to be more lasting.
   - Children simply learn *not to get caught*. That is, the child learns that the only reason not to engage in the misbehavior is to avoid punishment *if* caught.
   - It teaches children to punish, or aggress toward, others when they don't like their behavior, including punishing those they love.
   - It fails to address the multiple factors that typically contribute to the misbehavior.
   - It creates a negative home environment—one often characterized by arguing, anger, and fear.
10. ***Recognize the advantages of punishment, when used with other positive techniques.*** As defined in psychology, punishment consists of anything that is effective in reducing undesirable behavior, especially in the short term. This would include anything from looking sternly at your child or simply stating "Stop that please," to spanking your child. At times, parents need simple techniques that result in an immediate decrease in an undesired behavior. Authoritative parents—those whose children exhibit few behavior problems and who turn out well—use punishment (Baumrind, 2013). However, it is seldom harsh or unfair. More importantly, when used, it is used in combination with more positive techniques for teaching and guiding desired behaviors. Also, when punishment is used, it tends to be mild forms such as warnings, verbal reprimands, and taking away of privileges.

Responding to Misbehavior

The following recommendations focus on responding to, or correcting, misbehavior. Keep in mind, however, that to one degree or another, each recommendation also helps prevent the misbehavior from reoccurring and develops self-discipline. This result works because the focus is on not only imposing punishment, but also being responsive to the child's needs, including teaching the child alternative behaviors while giving guidance and support in improving behavior generally.

11. ***Avoid use of corporal (physical) punishment.*** The most common form of corporal punishment is spanking. Although research is unclear as to the effects of mild and infrequent spankings, research is clear in showing that harsh or frequent spankings lead to multiple negative outcomes (Larzelere, Morris, & Harrist, 2013). Regardless of its harshness or frequency, the National Association of School Psychologists, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and other mental health associations recommend against its use. This is largely in recognition of the multiple limitations of punishment, and especially corporal punishment, including those listed previously (see Recommendation 9).
12. ***Avoid or minimize arguing, yelling, and showing anger; speak calmly, firmly, and respectfully.*** Show disappointment in the student's misbehavior but try not to show anger (save it for the most serious transgressions, if then). When parents yell or show anger frequently, children become use to it and are more likely to ignore it. If you are angry, wait until later before discussing the problem (or have someone else attend to the problem, such as a spouse).
13. ***Highlight and discuss reasons why the misbehavior is unacceptable.*** Make sure that your child understands what he or she did was wrong,

why it was wrong, and what he or she should have done differently. Avoid teaching the child that the only reason not to misbehave is that you might get caught and punished. A primary reason a behavior is considered inappropriate is that the behavior affects others. Encourage the child to take the perspective of others and to experience empathy by considering how others might view the behavior and how it affects them.

14. ***Make sure the consequences "fit the crime."*** Before correcting the misbehavior, be sure that the child is actually responsible for the misbehavior, especially when punishment is used. Once this is determined, the consequences should be based on the severity of the behavior and its circumstances. This rule should be followed for the sake of fairness and to avoid many of the limitations of punishment, especially anger or retaliation over perceived unfairness. Also, fitting the consequences with the severity of the misbehavior is important because harsher consequences are not necessarily more effective than milder ones. For example, for many misbehaviors sending children to their room for 5 minutes is just as effective as doing it for an hour. And firmly stating "No" is just as effective as a 5-minute lecture.
15. ***Point out the child's strengths, positive disposition, character traits, or other personal qualities, and say how the misbehavior is not consistent with those traits.*** This often causes children to reflect on their behavior and compare it to the kind of person they want to be. For example, if your child hurts a sibling or peer, while correcting the misbehavior you might say, "You're a kind person, but hurting someone like you did is not something that is kind."
16. ***Avoid having the child feel that he or she is a bad person; instead, focus on why the specific behavior is bad.*** It is a lot easier for people to correct a specific behavior than to change themselves. They can fix the problem at the root of the behavior, accept the consequences, or learn an alternative behavior. Moreover, trying to make the child feel bad as a person, as opposed to bad about what he or she did, can trigger feelings of low self-esteem, shame, and depression, especially if repeated over time.
17. ***Emphasize what the child needs to do to fix the immediate problem and to prevent the misbehavior from reoccurring.*** Fixing the immediate problem might include repairing harm to others, such as apologizing. Preventing the reoccurrence of the misbehavior often requires that the child demonstrate a more positive behavior when in a similar future situation. For young children, that behavior might need to be taught. First ask the child what he or she should do to fix the problem and how to respond differently next time the problem situation occurs. If your child has no good answer, provide guidance, encouragement, and direct instruction if needed. Give choices or options, where appropriate, as to how the problem might be fixed and prevented from reoccurring.
18. ***Convey a sense of optimism that the child's behavior will improve.*** Convey that you trust that the child will not repeat the misbehavior (at least not in the immediate future) but will demonstrate the more appropriate behavior (as taught or discussed). For example, you might say, "I'm confident that you won't repeat what you did."
19. ***Challenge self-centered thinking.*** One of the more common thought patterns associated with misbehavior is the use of various excuses or justifications the child may use to avoid punishment: "He started it," "I didn't mean to do it," and "Others did it too." Such excuses and self-centered thinking should be challenged tactfully, but avoid interrogating the child. For example, you might state, "It really doesn't matter who started it, or if others were doing it. What you did was wrong because it was hurtful."
20. ***When punishment is used, always combine it with positive techniques for teaching and encouraging the behavior you desire.*** Make it clear what behavior should have occurred—what was expected or desired. However, also think about and plan for what *you* can do to increase the chances of preventing the behavior from reoccurring. This might include demonstrating what is expected, providing reminders, and praising the desired behavior when it is seen.
21. ***For minor behavior problems, redirect the child and warn of the consequences.*** For minor acts of misbehavior, such as arguing with parents or siblings, playing or using something when told not to (e.g., cellphone), or talking when asked to be quiet, it is often sufficient to simply redirect your child. This can be done either nonverbally or verbally. If the child doesn't respond to the

redirection, an additional warning of negative consequences might be needed. When the misbehavior stops, be sure to praise the child for stopping the misbehavior and engaging in a more desired behavior (e.g., playing cooperatively). The following are examples:

- *Nonverbally.* Simply establish eye contact, move in the child's direction, and give a stare, look, or hand signal that communicates "stop it now." There is no need to say anything (except perhaps "thank you" when the child responds correctly).
- *Verbally.* Whether or not you also use a nonverbal message, firmly state your child's name (without yelling), and say what the child should be doing instead of the undesired behavior (perhaps reminding the child of earlier success). Often, this is best done when combined with use of an "I" message, such as "It bothers me when I'm trying to read and you two are arguing with one another."). If the child doesn't respond immediately, give a warning of consequences and give a countdown (e.g., "I'm going to count to 3 and you need to do what I asked before I get to 3 or you're going to your room.").

22. ***For minor behavior problems, ignore the misbehavior, but be careful.*** Ignoring the misbehavior often works, especially with younger children and when the purpose of the behavior is to gain your attention. Recognize, however, that many actions should not be ignored, such as those that are harmful. Also, be aware that a major limitation of ignoring the misbehavior is that the misbehavior often gets a lot worse before getting better (e.g., the child screams louder to get your attention before finally deciding that no attention will be given).
23. ***For moderate behavior problems, use more restrictive techniques.*** Moderate behavior problems include continued minor acts of defiance or disobedience (e.g., when redirection fails) and first-time offenses of some more serious behavior problems, such as stealing from a sibling or parent or hitting someone. For these and similar acts of misbehavior, more restrictive techniques, such as the following, are needed, used in combination and with other recommendations, especially praise and rewards for appropriate behavior:
    - *Take away privileges.* For young children, this approach might consist of taking away a favorite toy immediately after the misbehavior occurs despite redirection or a warning. For adolescents, it might consist of taking away use of the cellphone, television or computer time, or use of the car.
    - *Use time-out.* For young children time-out might consist of having the child sit in a room with no toys, television, or interaction with others. For most all other ages, including adolescents, the child or adolescent would be sent to his or her room with restricted access to preferred activities while in the room, such as no use of a cellphone or computer and no television or music. The length of time would depend on the child's age and the seriousness of the misbehavior. For young children, time-out should not exceed 5–10 minutes. Often, only 1 minute is necessary. For specific steps on the use of time-out with young children, see *Temper Tantrums: Helping Handout for School and Home*.
    - *Develop a written contract.* Where age-appropriate, develop a written contract jointly with the child. Welcome input, where reasonable to do so. In the contract, define clearly what the behavior problem is and what behavior should replace it, state when the contract applies, and include reasonable goals and consequences. Consequences should be both positive (e.g., rewards for good behavior) and negative (punitive consequences if the behavior continues). Make sure all parts of the contract are fair and clear, and that the child agrees to it. Change the contract when needed.
    - *Include the use of self-management techniques.* For example, have the child record how often the behavior occurs (e.g., checking it on a chart on the refrigerator) and self-evaluate the behavior. Specific self-management techniques are presented in *Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home*.
24. ***For the most serious behavior problems, arrange for and provide more intensive interventions and supports.*** These behavior problems would include not only criminal acts, especially during adolescence, but also the continuation of harmful and defiant behaviors, regardless of age, after the above recommendations have been implemented consistently. Where appropriate, use a combination of the above techniques but with greater frequency and in a more planned and sustained manner.

Also, for serious behavior problems, as well as for some cases of moderate behavior problems, contact the child's school to see if the same behaviors of concern are seen there. If they are, be sure to meet and work with the child's teachers and support staff, such as a school psychologist, in developing interventions and helping to ensure consistency in how to respond to the misbehavior. If you decide to seek advice or services from a school psychologist or another mental health specialist at school or elsewhere, that person should consider the need for an evaluation. The results of the evaluation would then be the basis of an individualized and comprehensive intervention plan. The plan would include interventions, services, and supports (both at school and at home). Interventions likely would consist of counseling, social skills training, anger management training, and parent management training or family therapy. The plan might also include changes in the child's education, especially if special education is needed. The following also may help:

- *Make sure that any intervention plan is comprehensive.* It should be designed to include a network of mental health specialists and educators, as needed, working together with the family.
- *Make sure the interventions are supported by research.* Ask about their effectiveness with other children with similar behavior and read more about the interventions and supporting research.
- *Begin seeking additional help early.* As soon as it is evident that the child is not responding favorably to less intensive interventions, get referrals for professional services.
- *Stick with the intervention plan.* Far too often interventions fail because they are not implemented as planned and end too soon. Be patient and follow the intervention plan. However, if you are seeing little or no progress, don't hesitate to request changes or seek help from other mental health specialists.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

https://www.webmd.com/parenting/children-discipline-directory

This website contains a wealth of information on parenting, including tips on preventing and responding to common behavior problems. It also has blogs, videos, and slide presentations, such as "15 Alternatives to Spanking."

https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/

The Child Development Institute website offers advice and information to parents on children's health, learning, and psychology, including on discipline.

Books

Lickona, T. (2018). *How to raise kind kids*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

This is an excellent complement to *1-2-3 Magic*, listed below. It focuses much more on preventing behavior problems and developing character traits, especially kindness but also self-discipline, than on correcting misbehavior.

Phelan, T. (2016). *1-2-3 magic: 3-step discipline for calm, effective, and happy parenting*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.

This popular book for parents (with almost 2 million copies sold) offers practical advice to parents for preventing and correcting common behavior problems. Guidance is presented in simple steps that are easy for parents to follow.

Related Helping Handouts

ADHD: Helping Handout for Home
Anger and Aggression: Helping Handout for Home
Bullying: Helping Handout for Home
Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for Home
Gang Involvement and Getting Out of It: Helping Handout for School and Home
Happiness and Self-Esteem: Helping Handout for School and Home
Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home
Lying, Stealing, and Cheating: Helping Handout for Home
Oppositional Defiant Disorder: Helping Handout for Home
Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home
Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home
Tattling: Helping Handout for School and Home
Teasing: Helping Handout for School and Home

Temper Tantrums: Helping Handout for School and Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George G. Bear, PhD, is a professor of school psychology at the University of Delaware, and recipient of the 2017 Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of School Psychologists. His books include *Developing Self-Discipline and Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior; School Discipline and Self-Discipline: A Practical Guide to Promoting Prosocial Student Behavior*; and *Children's Needs: Development, Prevention, and Intervention* (coedited with Dr. Kathleen Minke). He is coeditor (with Minke) of *Helping Handouts: Supporting Children at School and Home*.