

## **PARENT SERIES**

University of Kansas, Clinical Child Psychology Program  
Parent Series Editor: Carolyn S. Schroeder, Ph.D., ABPP

# Managing Negative Behavior in Children and Adolescents

*by Moneika DiPierro, M.A. and Shaquanna Brown, M.A.*

**Patience is important, but there are techniques that can help you endure and improve the negative behavior.**

A major goal for parents is to teach their children to behave in socially acceptable ways and to exercise self-control. Yet as children become increasingly independent, their desires often come into conflict with those of parents. The result is typically a display of negative behavior by children, and sometimes by the parents. Negative behavior is so common at certain ages — toddler temper tantrums or adolescent rebellion, for instance — that it's considered normal. Negative behaviors may also increase when stressful life events occur during the normal course of a child's development.

These events might include the birth of a sibling, parental divorce, beginning school, or moving from elementary school to junior high school. The response of parents to these behaviors when they occur during normal development may determine whether the behaviors are merely transitory or whether they will persist.

The negative behaviors that are of most concern to parents are noncompliance — refusal to do what is asked — and aggression, such as biting, hitting and teasing. Noncompliance starts as soon as the child can understand parental requests, and can physically carry them out. There is evidence suggesting that toddlers may find complying with parental requests pleasurable.

At this age, children delight in matching their own actions to their parents' words. When parents share the child's pleasure, that makes it more enjoyable for the child, and increases the likelihood that the child will continue to comply. Noncompliance is usually not seen as a problem until about 2 years of age, when children begin to assert their need for independence and control.

Temper tantrums are probably the first real expression of aggression. Tantrums can be seen in infants as young as 9-15 months. During this age, infants begin to understand that their temper tantrums can express their frustration, and potentially result in getting what they want.

Aggression typically becomes a problem around 18-24 months, when children begin playing with peers. At this age, biting or hitting typically occurs in the context of learning to share and take turns. Boys are consistently found to be more physically aggressive than girls.

Individual differences in the expression of negative behavior exist from birth. These differences appear to reflect children's temperamental characteristics. Some children are simply more irritable, colicky, easily overstimulated, unpredictable, and present more challenges in their internal emotional and behavioral regulation, while others are easy-going. Even the most skilled parent can have problems dealing with the temperamentally challenging child. The following suggestions have been shown to prevent or decrease children's negative behavior. Parents should not feel guilty if their child is one who makes it more challenging for them to implement these ideas.

## **Infants and Toddlers (birth-24 months)**

To help infants or toddlers learn what is expected, provide consistent, predictable routines. Respond to their signals as promptly and accurately as possible. Do not expect your child to understand your requests and your temper tantrums.

### **Provide consistent, predictable routines.**

Consistent, predictable routines for eating, sleeping and other day-to-day activities can help keep infants and toddlers from becoming overstimulated and can prevent early temper tantrums.

### **Respond to the baby's signals as promptly and accurately as possible.**

Parents usually learn the meaning of their baby's cries and vocalizations early in the infant's life. Prompt, sensitive responses to these signals can prevent the baby from becoming frustrated and angry. This does not mean that you must always pick up the baby when he or she cries, but rather that you respond to the cries of distress. Some babies, for example, often cry five to 10 minutes before falling to sleep. It's harmless for the child.

### **Talk to your baby a lot, especially when he or she is alert and quiet.**

Describe your own and the baby's actions as they occur. For instance: *"You are looking at Daddy as he changes your diaper and gets you all clean."*

*"You are smiling. What a pretty smile."*

*"You like to play with your feet and laugh."*

Describing the baby's behavior is an effective way to begin teaching him or her what pleases you. If you continue doing this as your child grows and develops, you will effectively reinforce, by your attention, the child's appropriate behavior, and ensure it increases.

There is also a strong body of research that highlights the developmental importance of parents talking a lot to their children from birth through the preschool years. It increases children's vocabulary and their understanding of the world. These gains promote more successful academic school experiences.

Describing behaviors you like also reinforces appropriate behavior. This important skill is fun and easy to practice early in the child's life.

### **Do not expect your young child to understand your requests.**

When your child engages in troublesome or dangerous behavior, you must intervene quickly. Distract the child with an attractive activity; remove the child from the situation; or remove the dangerous object. It's always appropriate to tell the child what you want as you are doing it, even though the child does not understand. Eventually the child will begin to get the idea.

### **If — or more like when — your child bites or displays other aggressive behavior, you can use a modified time-out procedure.**

Immediately pick the child up and place him or her in a playpen without toys — it's best not to use the child's crib — or simply put the child on the floor away from the person he or she hit or bit for about a minute. At the same time, say "no biting" in a firm tone. This is an effective way to handle aggressive behavior at this age; but don't expect the child to learn not to bite on the first try. It takes time and many repetitions of the time-out procedure before the child gets the idea. Be patient and consistent with the firm "no biting" or "no hitting," and removing the child without further comment.

**Ignore temper tantrums.**

Make sure the child cannot hurt himself or herself — by head-banging on the sidewalk, or crashing into furniture, for example — then go about your usual activities until the tantrum ends.

This may take some time, especially for stubborn children. If needed, place the child in the playpen without toys, or a safe area on the rug. but stay within sight of the child so he or she does not become frightened. As soon as the tantrum is over, be sure to tell the child how glad you are that he or she is now calm.

Be careful to wait until after the temper tantrum is over to give your attention, or you may inadvertently reinforce the tantrum. Trying to reason with a child who is in the midst of a temper tantrum is futile. It only increases the likelihood of another tantrum in similar circumstances.

**Try to avoid reinforcing the child's undesirable behaviors.**

Sometimes children, especially those with dysregulated temperaments, can be so challenging that they exhaust their parents. Parents may unwittingly spend so much time attending to the negative behaviors that they become too exhausted to attend to desirable behaviors. For a better balance, work on avoiding or not attending to misbehavior. For example, don't laugh at your child's use of "bad words." It increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur again.

**Preschoolers (2-6 years)**

Catch them being good. Give clear and simple directions. Ignore low-level, annoying behavior. Use time-out consistently for behaviors that can't be ignored. Use reasoning carefully. Remember the power of your attention in increasing or decreasing negative behaviors.

During the preschool years, parents must provide control for children because children have not yet learned how to behave appropriately in different settings. This means that parents must structure the child's environment to encourage appropriate behavior, and discourage negative behavior. They must also provide consistent positive or negative consequences for the child's appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. During the preschool years, children learn many skills by imitating others. Parents are important role models for appropriate behavior and self-control.

**Catch your child being good**

Monitor and describe your child's appropriate behavior as you go about your daily routine. One way to practice this is to periodically check your child's behavior and ask yourself whether or not you like the behavior. If you do, then describe it. Research also shows that parents' positive attention during play helps reduce their child's future negative behavior.

*"You are making such a tall building with your blocks and playing so quietly."*

*"You are holding my hand so nicely. It is fun to take you shopping with me."*

*"You are getting in your car seat like a big boy. You are doing such a good job of keeping safe. That makes Mommy happy!"*

Preschoolers quickly learn which behaviors please their parents and engage in those behaviors to gain their parents' attention. Describing your child's appropriate behavior can often prevent confrontations and temper tantrums. It helps children understand they can earn attention through positive behavior, and communicates not only what is expected, but provides an example of how to do it.

*“It makes me so happy when you stay quiet while Daddy is on the phone.” versus “No talking!”*

*“You are waiting so nicely for Mommy to get ready.” versus “You need to wait 10 more minutes before we can leave”*

**Be clear about what you want your child to do.**

Children often appear disobedient when actually they might not understand what is being asked. Parents also have a tendency to make suggestions which imply a choice, when they really expect the child to obey without question. Do not present the command as a question or favor. Instead state it firmly, simply and directly.

*“Please clean up your room.” versus “Would you like to clean your room now?”*

Sometimes, the child may not have enough time to comply with the request, or too many requests may be given at once. The literature shows that children are more likely to comply with one parental request at a time, rather than a list of commands that may be confusing or forgotten. Parents may also tell a child to do something while not expecting the child to actually obey.

For example, *“Say goodbye to Grandma.”*

If you expect children to listen and follow directions, you must state those directions in clear, simple language that isn’t embedded in a lot of other information.

*“Please put your cup in the sink.” versus “How many times do I have to tell you to put your cup in the sink? I would think you would have learned that by now.”*

If you want the child to complete a complicated task, try breaking it down into smaller steps, and give the child only one step to complete at a time.

*“Please brush your teeth.”* After successful completion of the task, *“Please put your pajamas on.”* Once the child is in his or her pajamas, *“Please pick out a book for us to read.” versus “Please brush your teeth, put your pajamas on, and pick out a book for us to read.”*

Be sure to give the child time to comply with the request — at least five seconds. Alerting children that you will soon expect them to do something also helps.

*“In five minutes you’ll have to start putting your toys away.”*

**Ignore low-level, annoying behavior.** The best way to decrease many negative behaviors is to simply withdraw attention. Parents should be aware that when this is done, the behavior gets worse before it gets better. This happens because children always try to determine what it takes to get a response.

If you lack patience, this is not a good technique. Attention given to the behavior, after attempts to ignore it, only makes the problem worse. Research shows that children learn that using even more extreme behaviors will get your attention if you give in when their behavior peaks. Also, ignoring is not appropriate for many aggressive or dangerous behaviors which need an immediate response.

### **Use time-out for behaviors that can't be ignored.**

Time-out means removing the child from the possibility of getting positive attention. Place the child in a designated spot away from family activity, and certainly not in front of the TV. You can use a special chair; a corner marked with masking tape; or a safe, but boring room such as a guest room, or laundry or mud room. The child's bedroom can also be used, if it's not a place the child plays. Inform the child why he or she is going to time-out but don't say anything else.

*"Time-out for hitting your brother."*

*"Time-out because you did not pick up your toys when I asked."*

Use a timer set for two minutes, and no more than five minutes. Tell the child that he or she can come out when the bell rings, if the child's behavior is calm and he or she remains quiet.

If the child becomes disruptive during time-out, you can inform your child that you are re-starting the time-out for the entire length of time-out time. When time-out is over, be sure to notice and comment on the child's appropriate behavior. Do not comment on the misbehavior other than to ask the child to do what he or she refused to do before time-out.

You may have to repeat the time-out procedure several times to get compliance. Soon, however, the child will come to believe that when you say something you mean it. Research shows that time-out is an effective way to reduce negative behaviors. However, time-out must be done in a way that gives the parent control and does not accidentally reinforce the negative behavior. A few tips follow for an effective time-out:

### **Do not expect that a few experiences with time-out will do the trick.**

Children learn only over time. Consistent use of this method is necessary for effectiveness. Time-out will also not be effective unless the child receives great deal of positive parental attention for appropriate behavior. When the atmosphere in the home is predominantly negative, time-out can be a relief rather than a punishment. Research shows that positive one-on-one time with a child, when the child behaves well, is essential in making discipline work, including time-out.

### **Rules for Successful Use of Time-Out**

- Give simple, clearly stated commands, such as. "Pick up your shoes."
- Give reasons before the command, or after the child has done what you asked — *"Thanks for coming when I called. We have just enough time to eat before the ball game."*
- If the child does as asked, then praise the child or describe what he or she did that you liked. *"You are really good at putting on your seat belt."*
- If the child does not comply within five seconds — count silently — then give a warning. *"If you don't pick up your shoes you will go to time-out."*
- If the child complies, say "thank you."
- If the child still does not comply, then say "Time-out" and take or direct them to the time-out chair, spot or room.
- Do not talk on the way to time-out or while the child is in time-out.
- Put a timer on for two to five minutes. The timer starts when the child is quiet. If the child is still quiet when the timer rings say "Your time-out is over; you may come out." If the child is disruptive, screams, or becomes aggressive in time-out, let the child know you are restarting the timer.
- Repeat the command and the time-out sequence, if needed.

**Reason with your child only when the behavior is appropriate.**

Do not try to reason with your child when he or she is engaging in negative behavior, and especially not when the child is on the way to time-out.

Reasoning is important so that children can learn why some behaviors are unacceptable. However, reasoning at a time of the misbehavior only serves to reinforce that behavior through your attention. During misbehavior, children are not likely to listen to your reasoning. Instead, it's more effective to tell your child why you like the behavior when he or she has just engaged in the behavior, or to give the reason immediately before giving a command. *"We have to pick up Dad; please put your coat on."*  
**versus** *"Put your coat on; we have to pick up Dad right now."*

Giving the reason before the command alerts the child to the command, and helps him or her understand the behavior expected immediately following the command. It also makes it more likely that the child remembers the command.

**Use charts and rewards for specific behaviors.**

Simple charts with stickers for rewards can be used effectively to change specific behaviors such as refusing to go to bed or not playing nicely with a sibling. To learn most quickly and effectively, preschool children must experience the consequences of their behavior immediately. Administer rewards and punishments quickly and often. It's not appropriate, for example, to expect a preschooler to wait until the end of the week to receive a large reward for good behavior. Smaller rewards such as stickers, given immediately, are much more effective. Rewards don't have to be costly. They can be as simple as watching a TV show, or playing a favorite game with a parent or sibling.

**Spanking is not effective for managing negative behavior**

Routine spanking rarely works to control negative behavior, for several reasons. First, it provides a poor model for problem-solving and conflict resolution. Second, the child may come to fear or avoid the parent who spansks. Third, it teaches the child only what you don't want, not what you do want. Research has shown that spanking can lead to more negative behavior such as aggression and acting out. Using previously described techniques, such as reward charts and time-outs, are shown to safely and effectively reduce negative behaviors.

**School-aged Children (6-12 years)**

By the time most children reach 6 or 7 years of age, they have developed a better understanding of right and wrong. They begin to behave appropriately even when parents are not there to reward or punish. This is the beginning of true self-control. Parents still influence their children's behavior in important ways, but as children get older, parents grow less important than peers and adults outside the family.

**Continue to notice and describe appropriate behavior.**

It's important that the child continues to receive positive attention from you when he or she behaves appropriately. Remember to monitor his or her behavior and comment on the behaviors you like so those behaviors can be reinforced.

**Continue to model appropriate coping skills.**

At this stage, children become more aware of and verbal about their wants. Many times negative behavior at this age results from the child being disappointed about an undesirable outcome, such as earning poor grades or losing a basketball game. Help the child expand his or her coping-skills by demonstrating positive coping strategies in response to stressful situations. For example after the death

of a beloved family pet, you might encourage your children to honor the pet by creating a scrapbook of photographs of special moments shared with the pet; or by throwing a “celebration of life party” in the pet’s honor.

**Reasoning is increasingly important.**

Reasoning grows increasingly effective and important in managing negative behavior as children develop during the elementary school years. It’s best, however, to reason when appropriate behaviors occur, rather than around negative behaviors. Again, give a reason before your command, or immediately after the child has done what you asked. *“It is a big help that you put your coat on so quickly because Daddy is waiting for us.”*

**Let your child experience the natural consequences of his or her behavior when possible.**

For example, if your child dawdles at bedtime, then story time may have to be shortened or eliminated. If your child ignored your call for supper and arrives after everyone else has eaten, he or she may have to miss supper, or fix his or her own sandwich and eat alone.

Likewise, if your child gets into trouble for fighting at school, do not immediately decide that you must intervene in the punishment administered by the school. You also need not necessarily administer further punishment at home, unless, of course, the school fails to provide consequences for fighting. The child who experiences negative consequences as a direct result of his or her behavior, is less likely to engage in that behavior in the future. This method helps children internalize control over their own behavior, and understand the consequences that occur naturally in society. It can also reduce the child’s perception that you are being unnecessarily overprotective, overbearing or controlling.

**Negotiate contracts with the child for specific negative behaviors.**

Specific negative behaviors such as talking back, fighting with siblings, and using bad language, can be effectively controlled by simple contracts. The child should be able to exercise some control over rewards and punishments, although parents must always have the final word.

Asking the child what would be a “fair” punishment usually results in much harsher penalties than parents would impose. Tokens, such as marbles or beans, or points on a chart awarded for appropriate behaviors, are effective because they let parents administer rewards as the behavior occurs. Tokens earned can be exchanged at the end of the day or week for rewards such as family outings or activities, increased privileges such as staying up later, or special time with a parent. For children who are very negative, or for the parent who is not able to keep up with a chart, starting each day with a predetermined number of tokens or points can be effective. Start with 25-30 tokens per day. Tokens remaining at the end of the day are then exchanged for rewards.

**Be sure to:**

- Clearly define what you mean by negative behavior.
- Specify how many tokens will be removed for specific behaviors. It’s best to keep this to one, or at the most, two tokens.
- Be consistent in removing a token for each occurrence of misbehavior.

**Adolescents (12 and older)**

By the time children reach adolescence, control over negative behaviors is almost entirely based on the quality of the parent-child relationship as it has developed in previous years; and the extent to which the child has developed internal control over his or her own behavior. Parents no longer have much control

over their children once they reach adolescence, except to the extent that the adolescent wishes to please his or her parents.

During adolescence, negotiation, compromise and reasoning are key to managing negative behavior. Good communication skills are also important. Research shows that high levels of conflict and hostility in the parent-adolescent relationship are associated with negative behaviors. However, relationships characterized by support and granting the adolescent some independence, within reason, are linked to better adjustment.

Although adolescence is a developmental period characterized by growing independence, don't assume your adolescent no longer wants to spend quality time with you. Adolescents are experiencing many transitions and changes. This includes high school, and difficulties navigating romantic and platonic relationships. Don't be forceful, but continue working to have positive quality time with your child, and to encourage open and honest dialogue.

Listen to and respect your adolescent's opinion. Make sure your adolescent feels that he or she has been heard by restating what has been said, before offering your own opinion. Parents should not be afraid to let their adolescent know how they view a situation and what their values and beliefs are. At the same time, let your adolescent express his or her own views.

Use problem-solving skills to negotiate solutions to conflict. Adolescents who learn that you will listen to their opinions versus only expressing your own are far more likely to negotiate with you on major concerns or issues, as well as routine problems. The literature shows that parents who use problem-solving skills with their adolescent are more likely to have stronger attachments, increased levels of trust, and less hostility in the relationship.

### **Steps for Problem-Solving**

Identify the problem in terms that do not blame, criticize or condemn the adolescent. *"I really worry terribly when you don't come home when you say you will."*

Brainstorm alternative solutions to the problem. Accept all alternatives, regardless of how outrageous they may appear. *"What are some ways we could solve this problem so that I won't have to worry so much?"*

Discuss the potential consequences for each alternative. *"How do you think it would work if you called home when you realized you were going to be late?"*

Select one method to try that is acceptable to both parent and adolescent. *"Let's try this solution for a week and see how it works. Then we can change it if it doesn't seem to solve the problem."*

### **Pick your battles carefully.**

It is almost inevitable that you will have some conflict with your adolescent. It makes sense to try to avoid confrontations over relatively minor issues. Your adolescent is more likely to compromise about driving a group of friends in the family car to a late night rock concert if you have not been battling for weeks about keeping his or her room clean or getting a haircut. Setting limits regarding potential life-threatening or illegal activities is your responsibility as a parent. However, you also need to allow your child as much control as possible over issues that do not have such dire consequences.

## **Dos and Don'ts**

### **Do**

- Provide consistent, predictable routines
- Talk to your baby a lot, especially when he or she is alert and quiet.
- Ignore temper tantrums, unless they become unsafe.
- Catch your child being good, and describe the acceptable behavior in praise.
- Be clear about what you want your child to do.
- Use time-out for behaviors that can't be ignored.
- Use charts and rewards for specific behaviors.
- Reason with your child more and more as he or she grows older.
- Listen to and respect your adolescent's opinion.

### **Don't**

- Expect your child to understand all your requests.
- Make suggestions or provide options that give your child a choice, when you really expect obedience without question.
- Pay unnecessary attention to and administer consequences for low-level, annoying behavior.
- Expect that just a few experiences with time-out will do the trick.
- Try to reason with your child when he or she is engaging in negative behavior.
- Spank.

## **Books for Parents and Children**

*How to Talk So Kids will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk.* Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. New York, NY: Scribner, 2012.

This book provides parents with skills to effectively communicate with their children, and use problem-solving skills and limit-setting. The book also provides techniques for building healthy relationships with children and decreasing conflict in the home.

*Your Defiant Child, Second Edition: Eight Steps to Better Behavior.* Russell A. Barkley and Christine M. Benton. New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2013.

The authors offer research-based behavioral techniques for parenting children ages 5-12. They provide new techniques for managing challenging behaviors, and give examples of practical ways to use them.

*The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children.* Ross W. Greene. New York, NY: Harper Publishing, 2014.

This book helps parents respond effectively to aggressive behaviors including yelling, pinching and biting. The techniques presented are non-punitive and help parents reduce hostility and punishment, and focus on problem-solving the challenging behaviors.