

No Bad Kids – Toddler Discipline Without Shame (9 Guidelines)

Posted by [janet](#) on Apr 29th, 2010



A toddler acting out is not shameful, nor is it behavior that needs punishing. It's a cry for attention, a shout-out for sleep, or a call to action for firmer, more consistent limits. It is the push-pull of your toddler testing his burgeoning independence. He has the overwhelming impulse to step out of bounds, while also desperately needing to know he is securely reined in. There is no question that children need discipline. As infant expert [Magda Gerber](#) said, "Lack of discipline is not kindness, it is neglect."

The key to healthy and effective discipline is our attitude. Toddlerhood is the perfect time to hone parenting skills that will provide the honest, direct, and compassionate leadership our children will depend on for years to come.

Here are some guidelines:

1) Begin with a predictable environment and realistic expectations. A predictable, daily routine enables a baby to anticipate what is expected of him. That is the beginning of discipline. Home is the ideal place for infants and toddlers to spend the majority of their day. Of course, [we must take them with us to do errands sometimes](#), but we cannot expect a toddler's best behavior at dinner parties, long afternoons at the mall, or when his days are loaded with scheduled activities.

2) Don't be afraid, or take misbehavior personally. When toddlers act out in my classes, the parents often worry that their child might be a brat, a bully, an aggressive kid. When parents project those fears, it can cause the child to internalize the negative personas, or at least pick up on the parent's tension, which often exacerbates the misbehavior. Instead of labeling a child's action, learn to nip the behavior in the bud by disallowing it nonchalantly. If your child throws a ball at your face, try not to get

annoyed. He doesn't do it because he dislikes you, and he's not a bad child. He is asking you (toddler-style) for the limits that he needs and may not be getting.

3) **Respond in the moment, calmly, like a CEO.** Finding the right tone for setting limits can take a bit of practice. Lately, I've been encouraging parents that struggle with this to imagine they are a successful CEO and that their toddler is a respected underling. The CEO corrects the errors of others with confident, commanding efficiency. She doesn't use an unsure, questioning tone, get angry or emotional. Our child needs to feel that we are not nervous about his behavior, or ambivalent about establishing rules. He finds comfort when we are effortlessly in charge.

Lectures, emotional reactions, scolding and punishments do not give our toddler the clarity he needs, and can create guilt and shame. A simple, matter-of-fact "I won't let you do that. If you throw that again I will need to take it away" while blocking the behavior with our hands is the best response. But react immediately. Once the moment has passed, it is too late. Wait for the next one!

4) **Speak in first person.** Parents often get in the habit of calling themselves "mommy" or "daddy". Toddlerhood is the time to change over into first person for the most honest, direct communication possible. Toddlers test boundaries to clarify the rules. When I say "Mommy doesn't want Emma to hit the dog", I'm not giving my child the direct ('you' and 'me') interaction she needs.

5) **No time out.** I always think of infant expert Magda Gerber asking in her grandmotherly Hungarian accent, "Time out of what? Time out of life?" Magda was a believer in straightforward, honest language between a parent and child. She didn't believe in gimmicks like 'time-out', especially to control a child's behavior or punish him. If a child misbehaves in a public situation, the child is usually indicating he's tired, losing control and needs to leave. Carrying a child to the car to go home, even if he kicks and screams, is the respectful way to handle the issue. Sometimes a child has a tantrum at home and needs to be taken to his room to flail and cry in our presence until he regains self-control. These are not punishments, but caring responses.

6) **Consequences.** A toddler learns discipline best when he experiences natural consequences for his behavior, rather than a disconnected punishment like time-out. If a child throws food, his or her mealtime is over. If a child refuses to get dressed, we don't go to the park today. These parental responses appeal to a child's sense of fairness. The child may still react negatively to the consequence, but he does not feel manipulated or shamed.

7) **Don't discipline a child for crying.** Children need rules for behavior, but their emotional responses to the limits we set (or to anything else for that matter) should be allowed, even encouraged. Toddlerhood can be a time of intense, conflicting feelings. Children may need to express anger, frustration, confusion, exhaustion and

disappointment, especially if they don't get what they want because we've set a limit. A child needs the freedom to safely express his feelings without our judgment. He may need a pillow to punch — give him one.

8) **Unconditional love.** Withdrawing our affection as a form of discipline teaches a child that our love and support turns on a dime, evaporating because of his momentary misbehavior. How can that foster a sense of security? Alfie Kohn's *New York Times* article, "[When A Parent's 'I Love You' Means 'Do As I Say'](#)," explores the damage this kind of "conditional parenting" (recommended by experts like talk show host Phil McGraw and Jo Frost of "Supernanny") causes, as the child grows to resent, distrust and dislike his parents, feel guilt, shame, and a lack of self-worth.

9) **Spanking – NEVER.** Most damaging of all to a relationship of trust are spankings. And spanking is a predictor of violent behavior. *Time Magazine* article, "[The Long-Term Effects of Spanking](#)", by Alice Park, reports findings from a recent study: "the strongest evidence yet that children's short-term response to spanking may make them act out more in the long run. Of the nearly 2,500 youngsters in the study, those who were spanked more frequently at age 3 were much more likely to be aggressive by age 5."

Purposely inflicting pain on a child cannot be done with love. Sadly however, the child often learns to associate the two.

Loving our child does not mean keeping him happy all the time and avoiding power struggles. Often it is doing what feels hardest for us to do...saying "No" and meaning it.

Our children deserve our direct, honest responses so they can internalize 'right' and 'wrong', and develop the authentic self-discipline needed to respect and be respected by others. As Magda Gerber wrote in [Dear Parent – Caring For Infants With Respect](#), "The goal is inner-discipline, self-confidence and joy in the act of cooperation."

I offer a complete guide to respectful discipline in my new book:

[NO BAD KIDS: Toddler Discipline Without Shame](#)