

Preston Ridge Pediatric Associates, P.C.

About Children's Behavior

Michael R. Papciak, M.D.

From early infancy until adolescence, parents have many questions about raising their children. Since every child's personality and every family's characteristics are different, it is difficult for parents to find specific information or practical answers that apply to everyday situations.

Advice on these matters abounds. The bookstores and libraries have shelves of books on parenting; television and newspapers offer a wide array of columnists who speak about childrearing issues; and now the Internet provides a multitude of web sites filled with information about raising children. None of these sources, however, are as useful as guidance from another parent or childcare professional. The wide range of parental concerns include disrespectful behavior, temper tantrums, sleep patterns, eating problems, toilet training difficulties, attentional or learning problems, and finally, raising teenagers. As a doctor and father of five children, I have found the following guidelines to be helpful for parents of children of all ages.

Discipline and General Behavior

Discipline is teaching limits to your child. The caring and love a parent feels for a child and the security a child experiences in the family makes teaching rules and respect possible without adverse psychological consequences. Parents must hurt their child's feelings at times to influence behavior or changes.

Both parents should agree on discipline rules, follow through on threats, and act consistently on a day-to-day basis with no exceptions. This also includes anyone else who takes care of your child, such as a relative, babysitter, or childcare provider.

Expect the same behavior from your children in public as you do at home; however, do not expect their best behavior when they are hungry or tired. An afternoon rest time or nap is necessary for most young children and all infants. Make sure your children do things on your terms. Do not change your behavior to suit their wishes. If they are demanding something *right now*, make them wait, even for a few minutes, before giving in to them. Teach children that the grownups are in charge in your home. Try to replace telling them that they are "good" or "bad" in certain situations by instead telling them that their actions or behavior "made Mommy and Daddy very happy or unhappy." It is easier to train young children to relate to parental happiness for approval than having them constantly frustrated for trying to control their own efforts. Let them think, "How can I make Mommy pleased or

happy?" throughout the day's activities. Children who grow up knowing they can walk all over their parents will have little or no respect for them later.

Encourage your children and help them attain a good self-image, but be realistic and don't overdo it. Most children adjust better and demand less if they do not think of themselves as the smartest, prettiest, or cutest child in the world. Excessive complimenting or criticizing children rarely changes behavior for the better and will erode self-esteem later.

Never gossip or be critical of other people (relatives, neighbors, teachers, etc.) in front of your children.

Discipline and Punishment

Punishment reinforces discipline and should be reserved for dangerous, destructive, and disrespectful intentional actions by your child. Rarely will a child need to be punished before the age of 15 months.

“Time-out” is probably the best and most effective method of punishment. Time-out may be any safe area, playpen, gated room, or closed-door room. The parent must have control over the place and duration of time-out. Two to five minutes per year of age is a good guideline.

Taking away privileges or prized possessions works very well for the older child – ages five and above. Spankings may be a way of “getting the message” across to some children if all other methods fail. They should be administered at the time of the precipitating event so the child can learn from the experience. Spankings should be on the bottom with the hand only, and should never inflict pain. They should show the child who is in charge during certain situations or to reinforce parental decisions.

You must follow through on all warnings or contracts with a consequence. Be consistent with your punishment and do not wait for the other parent to come home. Never turn away from a child if he is remorseful after misbehaving and receiving punishment. If your child seems to be unaffected by any of the above methods and there is no deterrent to misbehaving in your home, you have reached a critical stage in his development of a permanent sense of right and wrong. Please communicate this to your pediatrician and we will figure something out before the “roof falls in.”

Temper Tantrums

Behavior such as temper tantrums, breath-holding, head banging and other attention-getting tactics are *normal* in two and three-year-old children. Such outbursts are best handled by putting the child off by himself or just simply ignore the tantrum. This will take the child away from his audience. If the undesirable behavior isn't upsetting anyone or commanding anyone's attention, it soon will stop. Try to reward your child's *good* behavior with your attention. It is important to follow this procedure both at home and in public places. If misbehavior occurs in a public place, be calm and remind the child every three to five minutes on the way home that a punishment is coming, and then follow through on the threat immediately when reaching home.

Sleeping Patterns

All children after the age of four months should be expected to sleep eight to twelve hours each night if they are healthy. Most breast fed infants may awaken during the middle of the night for a single feeding which should not require any time other than for nursing. After the feeding, the infant should be placed back in his bed and nighttime sleep routine continued. One of the best preventative measures to ensure that your child can easily get back to sleep when awakening during the night is to put your baby to bed when he is awake and not let him be rocked, fed, or fall asleep in his parents' arms or bed. Sleep is an important nutrient for the brain and will improve your child's behavior, attention span, and learning. A full night's sleep for all is essential for proper growth and development for the child and for survival for the parents. Happiest families are those with children that sleep in their own beds all night without interruption.

Adolescence

Building the bridges of communication between you and your adolescent begins many years beforehand. *Both* parents should spend individual time with their children regularly years before they reach their teens. Strive for a natural friendship and trust with your child, but don't become a "pal." Encourage your older child to read information about sexuality, smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases, but this is not a substitute for honest and frank discussions with parents. If you are reluctant to talk to your children about these subjects, you can't blame them for not involving you with their serious concerns later.

Older children learn respect for members of the opposite sex by parental example. Observing family interactions built around love and caring is the best way for children to learn about building long-lasting, respectful, and happy relationships with others.