

Talking To Young Children When They Misbehave

The development of language is one of the most exciting events of childhood. Children enjoy when their parents talk and read to them, and these activities are very helpful in improving your child's language skills. However, talking to a young child when he or she misbehaves may not result in the improvement in their behavior that you hoped for. This handout may help you to understand why.

As children learn language, their understanding of the concepts conveyed in language is immature. Most children between 2 and 6 years of age have a limited understanding of cause and effect, or of another person's feelings. Often, adults' explanations about discipline include references to these concepts. Even when a child uses the same words you would use to discuss these concepts, their understanding of the words and concepts is different from yours. Thus, they may not respond to your explanations in the way that you would expect.

Children thrive on their parent's attention. Often children misbehave at times when it is difficult to provide them with attention, such as when parents are with a sibling, talking on the phone, or preparing a meal. While the child is behaving, many parents continue what they are doing. When the child misbehaves, parents often stop what they are doing to issue a warning or explanation. This provides the child with attention for misbehaving. Despite the fact that this attention seems "negative," it has been repeatedly shown that this type of attention is likely to increase the frequency of the child's misbehavior. Even when the child stops misbehaving at the time of the command, he or she is more likely to misbehave in the future.

Most parents use verbal commands, warnings, or explanations at some time. If you are having difficulty managing your child's behavior, it is important that you discuss more effective disciplinary strategies with your child's pediatrician. The following guidelines may help you to use language more effectively.

1. At the time the child misbehaves, any explanation or warning should be brief; approximately one word for each year of the child's age is a good guideline. Example: "No hitting, time-out." Before placing a 3 year old in time-out for hitting.
2. Long explanations of the reasons for a punishment should not occur at the time the child misbehaves. When long explanations are necessary, they should occur after the punishment is over, and both you and your child are calm.
3. Do not issue a command or warning unless it is very important that the child behave differently. Example: before you give a command or warning, ask yourself, "Will I be willing to enforce the command or warning even if my child strongly resists?"
4. If your child does not respond to the first warning, another discipline strategy should be used. If you do not know or cannot get other disciplinary techniques to work, you should discuss this with your child's pediatrician.
5. Do not rely on explanations or reasoning alone to change the child's behavior.
6. If your child does not follow your instructions, the use of consistent consequences for not following instructions will make your instructions more likely to affect your child's behavior in the future.
7. Verbal commands are generally more effective in initiating a behavior than in stopping a behavior.