

# Building Better Behavior



Good behavior is a habit all parents can try to instill in their children, but it doesn't happen overnight. Use patience and the strategies in this guide to help you lay a foundation for good behavior at home and at school.

**Give positive attention.** Try to set aside a little uninterrupted time with your child each day, and let her take the lead in deciding how to spend it. She might want to have a special story time with you or take a walk around the neighborhood to talk about the day. She'll feel more important and secure—and be less apt to misbehave in an effort to make you notice her. *Tip:* While you're enjoying each other's company, be sure to give her your total attention. Turn off distractions like your cell phone or the television.



**Set ground rules.** Your youngster may be more likely to behave if he knows exactly what you expect.

Talk about the rules for behaving at home and in public. These might include things like keeping his hands to himself and listening quietly when others are speaking. Remember, you know your child best—choose rules that fit his age and abilities. As he gets older, you can update the rule list. *Tip:* To help everyone remember the rules, post them where they can be seen. Also, state them in a positive way. Instead of "Don't leave your bike on the driveway," write, "Put your belongings away when you finish using them."

**Discuss consequences.** The best time to talk about consequences is before a rule is broken. Let your youngster know in advance what will happen if she misbehaves or breaks a rule. For instance, you could say, "If you put your bike in the garage, you will be able to ride it tomorrow." *Tip:* Involve your child in deciding fair punishments for breaking rules.

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## A measure of self-control

This activity can help your youngster practice taking control of her own behavior.

1. Help her draw a thermometer on paper and add horizontal lines to divide it into thirds. She can color the bottom third blue and label it "Keeping my cool." Have her color the middle section yellow and write "Getting warmer." And she should color the top portion red and label it "Danger zone."
2. Together, brainstorm a list of ideas she can use to control herself when her "temperature" starts to rise. For instance, if she's starting to feel frustrated (perhaps her brother makes a

face at her), she might close her eyes and take a deep breath. If she's entering the danger zone (say, she feels like hitting him), she could walk away for a few minutes and cool down.

3. Let her write the ideas on the paper. Then, hang up the thermometer where it can remind her that she is in control of herself.





**Point out benefits of behaving well.** When your youngster sees the results of good behavior, he may try harder to stay on course. You can reinforce the idea by mentioning the positive consequence in connection with his behavior. “Sam, since you did all your chores without being reminded, we’ll have an extra half-hour to spend at the park.” *Tip:* It may be tempting to “bribe” your child to behave well, but this can make him dependent on rewards in the future. Skip the sticker or candy in favor of a more natural reward (say, time for an extra bedtime story because he got ready quickly).

**Catch your child being good.** Look for times when your youngster is behaving well, and praise her for it. Try to make your compliment specific: “I know you’re disappointed your brother got to pick the cereal—you handled it nicely.” Pointing out what she did right helps her recognize good behavior so she can repeat it in the future.

**Use logic.** It’s easier for your child to understand cause and effect if the consequences are related to his misbehavior. For example, if he skates without his helmet, it makes more sense to take away the skates than to take away dessert. *Tip:* Where appropriate, use “make it better” consequences that encourage your youngster to correct his behavior in a positive way. If he knocks down his sister’s block tower, he could help her rebuild it, for instance.

**Use statements instead of questions.** When you expect your child to do something, tell her in a clear, polite statement rather than asking a question. *Example:* “Maddy, please finish the game and get ready to leave” (instead of “Maddy, can you finish your game now?”). You’ll avoid opening the door to a debate.

*Tip:* Also, skip adding, “Okay?” to the end of directions.

It makes it sound like your request is optional. Rather than saying, “Let’s get ready to go, okay?” just say, “Let’s get ready to go.”



**Be consistent.** Even the most well-behaved youngster will act up or test the rules occasionally. When that happens, the best idea is to stick to your rules and consequences for breaking them. Knowing that you will respond exactly the same way every time he misbehaves can motivate your child to make better choices.

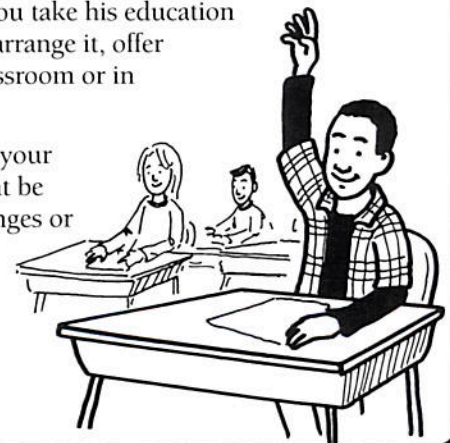
## When behavior is a problem at school

If your child acts out at school, what should you do? Here are some strategies to try:

- Be a team player. Meet with the teacher to discuss ways you can work together to improve the situation.
- Communicate regularly. Find out which method the teacher prefers (notes, emails, phone calls). Ask her to tell you about your youngster’s good days as well as the not-so-good ones. That way, you can praise him for his good behavior as well as talk to him about problems.
- Try to keep expectations consistent between home and school. Let your child know that you expect good behavior in both places. For example, if talking out of turn is the problem at school, remind him not to interrupt at home.

- Volunteer. When you are active in your youngster’s school, you show him that you take his education seriously. If you can arrange it, offer to help out in his classroom or in the cafeteria.

*Note:* If you think your child’s behavior might be related to family changes or other stress, or could have a physical cause, check with his school counselor or his pediatrician.



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