

Alternatives to Spanking Effective Discipline Techniques for Parents

Some families consider spanking to be an effective form of discipline for children who misbehave. However, because of rising concerns that spanking can have a negative mental — and sometimes physical — impact on children, many parents are seeking other options. This fact sheet offers several alternatives to spanking. But first, it is important to make a distinction between punishment and discipline.

Discipline vs. Punishment

While punishment is a "penalty" for misbehavior, discipline is a method of teaching a child right from wrong. Punishment, for example, can be physical, as in spanking; or it can be psychological, as in expressing verbal disapproval, isolating a child in his or her room, or taking away a privilege like watching television. Discipline, on the other hand, is a tool that can help children learn self-control and take responsibility for their own behavior. Children who are raised with discipline techniques rather than punishment are more likely to understand their own behavior better, show independence, and respect themselves and others more.

Parenting Styles

An "authoritative" parenting style is the most effective method. It involves establishing clear expectations for children, and firm and appropriate consequences for their misbehavior, while also showing them warmth and affection. Authoritative parenting involves parent-child communication about mistakes, teaching children about responsibility and how to make choices. Other less effective parenting methods are the "authoritarian" approach, which involves firm discipline and punishment with little warmth or affection, and the "permissive" style of parenting, which involves much warmth and love but little guidance or discipline.

Alternatives to Physical Discipline

While occasional, gentle spankings are not likely to cause children lasting damage, intense, repetitive spankings can lead to mental anguish in children, damage their self-esteem, increase their risk for depression, and leave them feeling bitter, resentful or angry. Intense spanking teaches children that violence is a way to solve problems and can lead to aggressive behavior in the future. Below are some positive and effective alternatives to spanking.

- **Be a positive role model.** Most children learn behaviors by observing their parents' actions. So parents must model the ways in which they want their children to behave. If a parent often yells, screams or hits, the child is likely to do the same.
- **Set rules and consequences.** Make rules that are reasonable, fair, realistic and appropriate to a child's level of development. Explain the rules to children along with the consequences of not following them. It is important that these consequences are related to the actual misbehavior, so children can learn from them. If children are old enough, they can be included in establishing both the rules and consequences of breaking them. This can help build self-esteem and cooperation skills, and reduce children's feelings of resentment or anger.

- **Encourage and reward good behavior.** When children are behaving appropriately, tell them so! In addition to giving verbal praise, occasionally reward children with tangible objects, privileges or increase responsibility – as long as such rewards are within reason.
- **Create charts.** Using charts to monitor and reward behavior is an interactive way for children to learn appropriate behavior. A “progress chart” that tracks specific problem behaviors (hitting or biting, for example) can help improve the behavior, and increase cooperation and self-esteem. Charts should be simple and focus on one behavior at a time, for a certain length of time.
- **Give time outs.** “Time outs” involve removing children from a situation following a negative behavior. This can help children calm down, establish control, end the inappropriate behavior and reenter the situation in a positive way. Make sure to explain what the inappropriate behavior is and why the time out is needed. Tell children when the time out will begin and how long it will last, and have them sit facing a wall away from distractions. Set an appropriate length for the time out based on age and level of development, usually just for a few minutes.

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For More Information

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