

Discipline is most effective when used consistently

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

I am sure all of us have witnessed the parent whose child continues to do something after being asked to stop or the parent who threatens repeatedly with punishment that never comes. This tolerance with threats teaches a child that regardless of what they do the parent will not follow through and so the behavior continues. If you ask your child to stop doing something and state that discipline will occur – if the behavior doesn't stop the parent must act. Children learn quickly who means what they say and who doesn't. Consistency is a major component of discipline and it's also essential to the development of trust in children.

Threats with failure to follow through signals to a child that actions have no consequences. It shows we are not serious about our expectations and this leads them to believe that they can do what they want without concern. Worse, this can lead them to think that there are never consequences for anything they do and that can spell trouble for the parent, the child, and the community, since rules are an important part living in any civilized society.

The first step in consistency is

establishing the boundaries you feel are most important, this means picking your battles and determining what you consider tolerable and what you don't. You and your spouse/significant other need to reach a consensus on these and agree that you will back each other up to ensure compliance. Additionally, if your child goes to daycare or school you should discuss what they feel is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Parents and others caring for the children must show a united front, even if not in perfect agreement. If boundaries are not defined children will assume none exist. Even with boundaries they will test them but without any they are navigating life without a map. Knowing the boundaries and expectations allows children to make informed decisions regarding their actions.

Disciplinary action should be thought out in advance. That way a parent won't go over the top in the heat of the moment and ground

their child for a year over a minor lapse. If you can't enforce the punishment then it's an empty threat – and kids know this.

Once boundaries are defined and the appropriate disciplinary action agreed upon, parents need



Parenting Tip

something explained in advance so the child understands why the rule is temporarily being lifted. For example, normal bedtime is 8 p.m. but the next week is spring break so you are allowing them to stay up until 9 p.m. Without an explanation a child may not understand why the bedtime rules changed from one week to another.

Positive reinforcement of good behavior is at just as important as correcting inappropriate behavior. Catching children doing the right thing nearly guarantees that children will repeat the behavior because ultimately children seek adult approval. That requires parents to pay attention and look beyond our many distractions. Telling children when they have acted appropriately reinforces the behavior and makes it more likely that compliance will continue.

Realistically, no one can be perfectly consistent. We are all human. We can, however, work toward being as consistent as possible regarding the consequences related to actions of our children.

You'll find useful online parenting tools at store.extension.iastate.edu/Topic/Home-and-Family. Just click "Child Care and Development" in the left column for a selection of resources. The extension service is an excellent resource for family and community.

Pendleton home economist Virginia Justice and her husband have two college-aged daughters.

to stick to their guns and not let things slide for whatever reason. This is the most difficult part, because frankly there are times when you are too busy, too tired, too involved in something else to deal with it. Resist the urge to just let it go. Allowing things to slide without consequence sends a message that, hey, maybe this really is not a boundary and it's likely to undermine obeying the rules down the line.

Of course, occasionally rules are bent; however, this should be

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