

Are You Yelling At Your Child Too Much?

A Parent's Guide to Dealing with Difficult Child Behavior

by Karin Suesser, PhD, Child Psychologist

How many times have I told you not to come into the house with muddy shoes? Look what you did to the carpet now, it's all dirty! Why can't you listen when I tell you something?"

Does this sound familiar? Maybe you have said similar things to your children in frustration. You are not alone! Most parents and caregivers, even though they love their children more than anything, will become frustrated at some point when children don't do what they are asked to do, throw tantrums, whine, fight with siblings, or argue with parents about chores and bedtime.

Raising children is a complicated job, and there are often no clear-cut answers to the dilemmas parents face on a daily basis. I'd like to suggest that the most effective way of dealing with children's difficult behavior is to make a plan in advance, before the misbehavior actually occurs, for how you would like to handle the situation. This helps you to stay in control of the situation and to react to your children in a predictable and calm manner rather than reacting in the heat of the moment, with anger, blaming, and yelling.

The suggestions below are ideas that have helped many families reduce their children's difficult behavior and increase the amount of positive interactions between parents and children.

Spend positive time together—every day. When children know they are loved and respected by the important adults in their lives, they will respond to those adults in a much more pleasant way. The best way to let your children know that you love and respect them is to spend positive time with them, even if it's only 10-15 minutes each day (to a child, that's a long time!). Don't wait for large chunks of "quality time" to come along once a month. Instead, look for daily opportunities to join your child in their play for a few minutes, read a book together, or really listen to them. Praise and encourage your children daily, and give them positive feedback, even for small things. All of this builds a foundation of love, trust, and respect.

Any attention is better than no attention, as far as the child is concerned. A parent's attention is a powerful reward for any child, and they will do whatever it takes to get the parent to pay even more attention to them, even if the attention is

negative (such as a parent's nagging, yelling, and arguing with a child). Therefore, make sure you don't pay more attention to your child's misbehavior than his or her positive behavior. Instead, let your children know that you will pay lots of positive attention to good behavior when it occurs. Don't wait for your child to do something extraordinary—pay attention to the small things they do right on a daily basis, such as getting dressed by themselves, taking their shoes off at the door, or playing quietly by themselves for a while. Praise the positive behavior in a specific way to let the child know what he or she did right, so they can repeat it. For example, say, "Good job of taking your shoes off at the door when you come in! That really helps keep the carpet clean! Thank you!" Remember that sincere praise for anything the child does right is the most powerful way changing children's behavior, and is much more effective than nagging, yelling, or punishment for misbehavior.

Use rules and routines. Having specific rules and routines for such daily activities as homework, family meals, bedtime, and chores helps things go more smoothly. Create a list of rules to let your children know exactly what you expect of them in different situations, and also what behaviors are ***not*** allowed. For example, a rule for mealtime may be, "Everyone stays in their seats until the entire meal is over" and "No complaining about food allowed—be polite if you don't like something." When your children know exactly what you expect of them, you will need to do much less nagging and complaining. A simple reminder of what the rule is ("Remember, we stay in our seats until the meal is over" can help kids cooperate better.

Make your requests brief and specific. Parents sometimes become upset when their children don't do what they are told. Many of us then have the tendency to engage in long run-on lecture, as a way of venting. In most families, this sounds something like "didn't I tell you three times already... why can't you ever listen... why do we have to go through this every single time... just once I want to see you do..." No wonder kids tune you out! Instead, try keeping your remarks short and to the point by trying one of three possibilities: ***Describe the behavior*** (e.g., "You walked into the house with muddy shoes—take them off, please."); ***State the rule***

(e.g., “We always take our shoes off at the door—now please”); *Say it with one or two words* (e.g., “Shoes off!”). Your kids are more likely to listen, and you are less exhausted using fewer words.

Point out a way to be helpful. The most common remarks children hear from their parents include the words “No,” “Don’t,” and “Stop.” The problem with such remarks is that they only teach children what NOT to do, and don’t give them an idea of what behavior you expect from them instead. Children are often eager to help their parents but they need to be told exactly how to be helpful. For example, when you are preparing a meal your child comes in and put his or her toys on the kitchen floor to play (probably out of a desire to be close to you), instead of saying, “Don’t put your toys all over the floor, can’t you see I’m busy in here?” say, “Let’s put your toys on the table so I can watch you play while I cook.” A child who is pulling flowers can be taught how to pull weeds instead. A child who is scribbling on furniture or walls can be asked to draw a picture for someone on paper instead. Be creative—think of fun ways that your children can be helpful to you, then praise them for their appropriate behavior.

Don’t give in to whining and arguing. This sounds like common sense yet most parents have, at one time or another, done just that. Parents get tired of dealing with whining children, and sometimes giving in can be an easy way to create short-term peace. But it’s just that: short-term. Once your children learn that you can be manipulated by whining, they will try this strategy over and over, knowing that, at least every once in a while, they will be successful. To reduce whining and arguing, let your children know that you are perfectly willing to listen to them, *but only* when they start using a more pleasant tone of voice. Statements such as “I will listen to you when you talk in your big-kid voice” teach children that there are alternatives to whining that may be more successful. Of course, listening is not the same as giving in. But if you give in to a child who is asking you nicely, at least they learn to ask nicely again in the future!

Make sure you mean what you say. Don’t say anything that you aren’t prepared to back up, if needed. Otherwise, they will learn to not take you seriously when you make requests. For example, if you call your children to dinner and they don’t respond immediately by coming to the table, be prepared to

go to them, take them by the hand, and tell them that you expect them to come when you call them the first time. This prevents you from having to repeat your request over and over again, and children learn that they are supposed to respond to your first request, not the third, fifth, or tenth one.

Children learn best from consequences, not lectures. Children are not little adults. Just because you tell them something once or twice doesn’t mean they’ll do it the next time. Don’t rely on words and reasoning to get your child to do what you want. Instead, let your children experience the natural consequences of their misbehavior. For example, if they are not getting ready on time for school or another activity that they have planned, then let them be late and suffer the consequences! Sometimes, learning the hard way is the best way to learn, so be happy when your children make mistakes; that’s how they learn best! Another example of a natural consequence is to put all the toys that didn’t get cleaned up into a box which goes onto the top shelf of the closet for a few days, *without a lecture or long explanation of what you are doing*. If children miss their toys, they will be more likely to remember to clean them up next time so they can keep playing with them. And remember to praise them when they do clean up.

Practice what you preach. You know this one already but it’s worth repeating: Children learn best from our example, not from our lectures. If you treat other people with respect and courtesy, your children are much more likely to treat others that way, too, including you! If you complain about your work or chores a lot, guess what your children will do? Clearly, parents can’t always be perfect role models for their children, so what if you make a mistake and your child witnesses it? Consider turning your mistake into a learning opportunity. Your children will learn much more from seeing you admit your mistake, apologize for it, and then make an honest effort to do better next time, than they would if you were trying to cover up your mistake.

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