

Handling Your Child's Challenging Behaviors at Every Age

babies • toddlers • preschoolers • school-age • teenagers



Parenting is one of the hardest jobs in the world. While raising children can bring a lot of joy and love into our lives, it's also a lot of work and responsibility to prepare children to be independent and capable adults. Parenting is particularly difficult because our children are constantly changing. Knowing what to expect helps us understand that many challenging behaviors are just a normal part of growing up. As our children grow, our expectations and the way we parent should change as well.

This guide can make parenting a little easier by helping you learn more about how to connect with your child and handle challenging behaviors at every age.

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

As parents, we can help our children learn from their experiences, behaviors, and mistakes through the way we support and discipline them. According to Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, "Discipline is teaching, not punishment. It won't happen overnight. It takes repetition and patience. Parents' long-term goal for discipline is to instill self-control, so that children eventually set their own limits. This will take many years."¹ Here are some general ways that you can support your child:

- **Connect with your child.**² Spend time with her, hug her, love her, and listen to her. Children learn to self-regulate and calm down just by being with their parents.² Respond to your child in a predictable way so she knows she can rely on you.³
- **Communicate with your child.**² Treat her with respect. Show warmth and sensitivity.³ Model behaviors you want to see in her. Give specific praise for her effort, progress, or positive behaviors.²
- **Have clear, consistent rules, expectations, and consequences.**²
 - Accept and empathize with your child's feelings, but set limits on behaviors.⁴
 - Follow the 4 R's of consequences: "Consequences should be *related* to the behavior, *reasonable* in scope, *respectful* of the child, and *revealed* in advance."²
 - Use appropriate discipline without harshness.³ Harsh physical or verbal discipline can harm your relationship and doesn't help your child learn to behave in the future. Harsh punishment has been linked to aggression, behavior problems, and depression in children.⁵

A FEW REMINDERS FOR YOUR PARENTING JOURNEY

- **You CAN'T MAKE your child do anything.** What you have control over is how you respond.⁶
- **Misbehavior is a normal part of growing up.** Be curious about what the misbehavior means and work to figure out its cause. It's also normal for kids to be upset sometimes.²
- **There is NO perfect parent.** All parents make mistakes, and you don't need to get it 100% right. We can all learn from our experiences and try a new approach the next time.
- **It is normal to feel anger and frustration with your child sometimes. Try to calm down before you talk to your child.** Take deep breaths or step into another room or outside.⁶ You can express your anger with words as long as you don't attack your child's personality or character.⁴ "I'm angry you left your bike outside." "I'm frustrated you're not following directions."
- **Apologize to your child** when you have lost your temper or handled something poorly. You will be modeling taking responsibility for your actions.
- **It takes a village to raise a child, so find help when you need it.** Read this guide, talk to friends and family, read parenting books or blogs, take a parenting class, talk to your child's teacher or counselor, visit a family resource center, or talk to a therapist.

Even though parenting can be incredibly rewarding, we all know that it is also hard work to help your child grow into a resilient and responsible adult. In this guide, you will find positive ways to handle your child's challenging behaviors at every age. Read through the ideas and think about one or two that you want to try!

¹ *Discipline: The Brazelton Way* by T. Berry Brazelton and Joshua D. Sparrow

² *The Good News about Bad Behavior* by Katherine Reynolds Lewis

³ www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/facts.html

⁴ *Between Parent and Child* by Haim G. Ginott, Alice Ginott, H. Wallace Goddard

⁵ www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Disciplining-Your-Child.aspx

⁶ www.zerotothree.org/resources/338-managing-your-own-emotions-the-key-to-positive-effective-parenting

BABIES • 0-1 years

Your baby adores spending time with YOU! He wants to know that you will be there to soothe him when he is upset, but he also wants to interact with you when he feels excited, shy, or curious. He wants consistent, reliable, and predictable care from his caregiver(s).⁷ So respond when he babbles, cries, or tries to get your attention.⁸ Talk to him, make eye contact, or smile at him. Your baby learns by engaging with you.⁸ You also help your baby develop trust when you respond to him.⁷ And remember, your baby loves when you sing, talk, cuddle, hug, kiss, play with, and read to him!

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS⁹

- ✓ Not sleeping regular hours
- ✓ Crying
- ✓ Putting everything in her mouth
- ✓ Getting into things
- ✓ Testing limits (for older babies)

HANDLING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

- **Take good care of yourself so you can take care of your baby.** Babies are exhausting, so prioritize sleep and self-care over things that can wait.¹⁰
- **You can't spoil your baby.** Your baby's brain grows when you meet her needs and respond to her. So cuddle and hold her as much as you can!⁸
- **Learn about the *Period of PURPLE Crying*.** All babies cry, but they cry more between 2 weeks and 4 months. Visit purplecrying.info to learn more.
- **Soothe your baby when she is fussy.** All babies cry sometimes. That's how they communicate. After you check her diaper and feed her, try soothing her with closeness, skin-to-skin contact, white noise, different positions, moving, rocking, pushing her in a stroller, giving her a pacifier, or going outside.¹¹ Pay attention to your baby's cues and what she needs.¹²



- **If you're getting frustrated with your baby, put her down on her back in a safe place, and take a break and a few deep breaths.** Check on her in a few minutes when you're calmer. Never shake your baby.¹¹
- **Make your baby's environment as safe as possible** so she can explore without needing you to limit her or say "no" too often.¹³
- **Distract and redirect** your baby if you don't like what she's doing or if she is doing something unsafe. If you need to take something away from your baby, give her something new to explore.
- **Provide limits when necessary.** Use positive language when possible. Say, "Food stays on your plate" instead of "Don't throw food on the floor." If your baby continues to throw food, comment without anger, "You're telling me you're done with dinner." Pick her up and move her. It is normal to need to repeat this until your baby learns the limit or learns to limit herself!

7 www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html

8 developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/

9 www.heysigmund.com/developmental-stage/

10 www.yolokids.org/make-time-yourself-self-care-guide-busy-parents

11 purplecrying.info/sub-pages/soothing/common-sense-and-well-tried-soothing-methods.php

12 *Discipline: The Brazelton Way* by T. Berry Brazelton and Joshua D. Sparrow

13 www.babycenter.com/0_childproofing-around-the-house_460.bc

TODDLERS • 1-3 years

Your toddler craves your time and attention. Read to her, give her hugs and cuddles, sing to her, play with her, take her for walks and go to the park, talk to her, and listen to her. Share what you notice about her creations, efforts, or good behaviors. Expect to have conflict with your toddler—no matter what. Toddlers want independence and control! You can help your child become confident and secure by letting her explore, experiment, help with chores, and figure things out by herself when it's appropriate. Try not to criticize mistakes or accidents.¹⁴

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS OF THE AGE¹⁵

- ✓ Waking up in the middle of the night
- ✓ Being defiant (like refusing to do what you ask)
- ✓ Hurting other people by biting, hitting, and kicking
- ✓ Loving to say (but not hear) the words “no” and “mine”
- ✓ Getting angry when he doesn't get his own way
- ✓ Having tantrums

HANDLING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

- **Make sure your toddler gets enough sleep, eats regularly, and has consistent routines.¹⁶**
- **Talk about feelings when things are calm.** Practice labeling feelings for yourself, your child, and others. Talk about acceptable ways to show all feelings, including anger and jealousy.¹⁷
- **Pick your battles and avoid power struggles.** Your toddler wants to feel powerful and in control, so save limits for things that really matter, like safety, health, and not hurting others.¹⁶
- **Stay calm. Take a few deep breaths or a time out yourself** if you're getting angry or impatient. Don't take your toddler's behavior personally.¹⁸ It's a toddler's job to test his parents!

- **Use “Do” instead of “Don't” language.** Say, “Walk please” instead of “Don't run.”
- **Use “When...then” directions.** “When the toys are picked up, then you can have a snack.”¹⁹
- **Give age-appropriate choices** you can live with so that your child can feel some control. “You can wear a clip or get your bangs cut.” “Do you want to wear the green or blue shirt?”²⁰
- **Allow your child to feel whatever he feels.** Your job is to help him express emotions appropriately. “You're mad and sad that we need to leave the park. You wish we could stay.”¹⁷
- **Set limits on actions.** Be clear and firm about unacceptable conduct and acceptable substitutes. “It's okay for you to be mad and sad, but you cannot throw sand. You can throw a ball in the yard when we get home.”¹⁷
- **If your child doesn't listen to the limit, give consequences related to the limit.** Don't explain or lecture. Just say, “Sand isn't for throwing” and pick him up. If your child hits you, remind him, “Hitting hurts. You may not hit. Let's go sit together until you feel calmer.”¹⁷
- **Don't talk during tantrums.** Tantrums are a way for toddlers to let off steam when they're frustrated. Find what helps your child calm down. It might be a hug or going to a quiet place. When it's over, give him a hug, talk calmly about what happened, and discuss how to handle big feelings in the future.²¹



14 www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html

15 www.heysigmund.com/developmental-stage/

16 www.ahaparenting.com/ages-stages/toddlers/toddler-tantrums

17 *Between Parent and Child* by Haim G. Ginott, Alice Ginott, H. Wallace Goddard

18 *Discipline: The Brazelton Way* by T. Berry Brazelton and Joshua D. Sparrow

19 *The Good News about Bad Behavior* by Katherine Reynolds Lewis

20 www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/positive-discipline/give-choices

21 www.yolokids.org/weathering-storms-guide-healthy-expressions-emotions

PRESCHOOLERS • 3-5 years

A preschooler loves to play, so give him your time and attention as you play together. Talk to him about what he's doing and listen to him. Find out what is important to him. Read to him, sing with him, cuddle with him, play games or toss a ball with him, count things with him, and start pointing out letters and words as he gets closer to kindergarten.²² Help him develop initiative and feel secure by encouraging him to play with other children, dress himself, do simple chores, and plan real and pretend activities.²³

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS OF THE AGE²⁴

- ✓ Wanting control
- ✓ Having a hard time sharing
- ✓ Getting easily frustrated
- ✓ Being bossy
- ✓ Whining
- ✓ Using aggressive words like "I hate you"
- ✓ Hitting and grabbing
- ✓ Developing sudden fears and phobias
- ✓ Not wanting to go to bed
- ✓ Having tantrums

HANDLING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

- **Make sure your child is getting enough sleep, social time, downtime, and time with you.**²⁵
- **Create a safe environment** for exploring and playing so you can say "no" less often.
- **Develop routines** so your child knows what to expect during her day.²⁵
- **Talk about and read books about feelings** and appropriate and safe ways to express them.²⁶
- **Pick your battles.** Sometimes ignoring bad behavior or using humor can help stop the behavior.²⁷ However, don't use sarcasm, which can be confusing for preschoolers to understand.
- **Calm down** if you are getting frustrated, and don't take your child's behavior personally.²⁸



- **Use "Do" instead of "Don't" language.** Say, "Walk please" instead of "Don't run."
- **Use "When...then" directions.** "When your shoes are on, then we can go outside."²⁹
- **Give choices** about things like clothing or what to eat for a snack to give her a sense of control. Make sure that you are fine with any of the limited choices you give.³⁰
- **Tell her when you notice** that she has done something kind, creative, polite, or helpful.
- **Show the behavior you expect from her.** Model how to share and be polite.³⁰
- **Do not limit feelings,** but help your child express emotions appropriately. Reflect your child's emotions: "You are mad. You want to build the house a different way."³¹
- **Set limits on behaviors.** Be clear and firm about what is unacceptable conduct and what substitute will be accepted. "Your friend is not for pushing. Your scooter is for pushing."³¹
- **If your child doesn't listen to the limit, give consequences related to the limit.** Don't lecture. Say, "Hitting hurts. You may not hit, even when you are mad. You are going to have to stop playing with the blocks." Then remove your child from the situation or take away the toy.³¹
- **During tantrums, don't talk, explain, or yell.** Stay calm and close by. Once your child settles down, talk calmly about what happened, and discuss acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.²⁶

22 www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/caqdevelopment.asp

23 www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html

24 www.heyigmund.com/developmental-stage/

25 www.ahaparenting.com/Ages-stages/preschoolers/wonder-years

26 www.yolokids.org/weathering-storms-guide-healthy-expressions-emotions

27 www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Disciplining-Your-Child.aspx

28 www.yolokids.org/make-time-yourself-self-care-guide-busy-parents

29 *The Good News about Bad Behavior* by Katherine Reynolds Lewis

30 www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/preschoolers.html

31 *Between Parent and Child* by Haim G. Ginott, Alice Ginott, H. Wallace Goddard

SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN • 5-12 years

Although your child is starting to care a lot more about friends and school, she still needs you! Make time to talk and connect every day.³² Kids can be quite talkative in the car, at meals, and when they get home from school. Show interest in her hobbies and friends.³³ Develop family routines that support connection, like family meetings, meals together, and holiday celebrations.³² School-age children want to feel competent, so let your child take on age-appropriate challenges like cooking, cleaning, bathing, and caring for belongings. Don't always rescue her, even if things don't go well.³⁴ Praise her effort, no matter what happens!



CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS OF THE AGE³⁵

- ✓ Acting like he knows everything
- ✓ Frequently complaining
- ✓ Being dramatic
- ✓ Becoming frustrated and angry (although with more words than earlier)
- ✓ Caring about what others think
- ✓ Pushing against rules
- ✓ Arguing

HANDLING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

- **Don't overschedule your child.** School-age kids still need downtime.³²
- **Keep it simple.** Be clear and don't lecture. Remember humor often helps solve problems.³⁶
- **Pick your battles.** Focus your energy on safety, health, and respecting others.
- **Stay calm when things get rough.** Take a few deep breaths. Pause before responding. Seek empathy from your friends. Forgive yourself and your child when things don't go well.
- **Encourage your child to talk about his emotions.**³⁷ Don't get upset with your child for being scared, sad, jealous, or angry. Talk about how to appropriately express these normal emotions.

- **Nurture problem-solving and negotiating skills.** If your child wants you to change a rule, explain your perspective and listen to his ideas. Maybe you both can compromise.³²
- **Let your child figure things out on his own when challenges are safe and age-appropriate.** He will learn from his mistakes more quickly than if you rescue him. Don't criticize or punish him.
- **Create family rules and consequences together.** Your child will be more likely to follow limits if he helps create them. However, it's your job to enforce consequences.³⁸
- **Stick to limits but do not punish your child.** Here are some ideas:³⁹
 - **Express your feelings strongly—without yelling or attacking character. Focus on the behavior:** “I am frustrated because you are not sticking to your hour limit on screen time.”
 - **State your expectations. Be clear and firm:** “I expect you to stick to your TV time limit.”
 - **Show your child how to make amends:** “Turn off the TV now.”
 - **If your child doesn't stop, give him a choice:** “You can stick to the hour of screen time we agreed on, or you can give up the privilege of watching TV tomorrow. You decide.”
 - **If your child still doesn't stop, take action:** Child: “Where is the remote?” Father: “I put it away until tomorrow. Why do you think I put it away?”
 - **Problem-solve together for the next time:** “What can we do to help you stick to your screen time limits?”

32 www.ahaparenting.com/Ages-stages/school-age/your-gameplan

33 www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/middle.html

34 www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html

35 www.heysigmund.com/developmental-stage/

36 Between Parent and Child by Haim G. Ginott, Alice Ginott, H. Wallace Goddard

37 www.yokokids.org/weathering-storms-guide-healthy-expressions-emotions

38 *The Good News about Bad Behavior* by Katherine Reynolds Lewis

39 *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

TEENAGERS • 13+ years

Your teenager is trying to discover who he is and where he fits in the world.⁴⁰ Part of that journey involves figuring out how he relates to you now. Be prepared for him to talk to you one minute and ignore you the next.⁴¹ Try not to take it personally. Be ready to connect, talk, give hugs, and celebrate his efforts and accomplishments when he's ready.⁴² Eat meals together when possible. Respect his privacy and listen without judgment and he'll be more likely to ask you for guidance or help.⁴³ Empathize a lot, give information, share your values, but don't lecture.⁴⁴

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS OF THE AGE⁴⁴

- ✓ Arguing
- ✓ Becoming more emotionally distant
- ✓ Prioritizing friends over family
- ✓ Changing sleep patterns (falling asleep late, waking up late)
- ✓ Engaging in risky behaviors like drinking, smoking, vaping, using drugs, and becoming sexually active

HANDLING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

- **Listen respectfully to your teen.** Don't dismiss her feelings, which can make her defensive.⁴³
- **Be brief, clear, and respectful.** If your teen is disrespectful, respond, "That was rude. Please do not speak to me like that." Then, let it go. Make your point and let her process it.
- **Be kind to yourself.** It's normal to feel worried about your teen and sad when she pulls away from you. It can help to share your feelings with friends who have teens.⁴³
- **Be honest and share your values.** Discuss the risks of sex, alcohol, drugs, smoking, and vaping.⁴⁵ Help your teen brainstorm how to handle difficult or uncomfortable situations. Let her know you will help if she finds herself in risky or unsafe situations.⁴²
- **Support good self-care,** such as getting enough sleep and exercise, eating healthy foods, avoiding caffeine late

in the day, and limiting screen time, especially before bedtime.⁴⁶

- **Encourage your teen to solve her own problems.** Show her you have confidence in her and offer support when she needs it.⁴³
- **Set limits and consequences together about things that are really important to you.⁴⁷** Agree on non-negotiable family rules, like using a respectful tone and avoiding drugs and alcohol.⁴⁸
- **Teach without punishing.** Punishment does not help your teen learn from her mistakes. Instead, she may focus on how unreasonable you are! Here are some alternatives to punishment:⁴³
 - **State your feelings:** "I'm upset that you're not turning in your math homework."
 - **State your expectations:** "I expect schoolwork to come before activities."
 - **Show how to make amends:** "All of your assignments need to be made up."
 - **If your teen doesn't make amends, offer a choice:** "1) Give up soccer until you're caught up or 2) find a way to fit in homework and soccer. I believe you can do it."
 - **Take action if the behavior continues:** "You need to take a break from soccer until you're caught up and can stick to a schedule that makes time for both homework and soccer."



40 www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html

41 *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood* by Lisa Damour

42 www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence2.html

43 *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen & Listen So Teens Will Talk* by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

44 www.heysigmund.com/developmental-stage/

45 www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence.html

46 www.ahaparenting.com/Ages-stages/teenagers/parenting-teens

47 *The Good News about Bad Behavior* by Katherine Reynolds Lewis

48 www.ahaparenting.com/Ages-stages/tweens/positive-discipline-preteen

TO LEARN MORE...

WEBSITES ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTING

- **Ages and Stages** (American Academy of Pediatrics) www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages (Also in Spanish)
- **Ages and Stages of Development** (California Department of Education) www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/caqdevelopment.asp
- **Aha! Parenting Website and Blog** www.ahaparenting.com
- **Parent Information** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
 - Positive Parenting Tips www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting (Also in Spanish)
 - Essentials for Parenting Toddlers and Preschoolers www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials (Also in Spanish)
- **What's the Best Way to Discipline My Child?** (American Academy of Pediatrics) www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Disciplining-Your-Child.aspx (Also in Spanish)

BOOKS ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTING (Available at Yolo County Library)

- *Between Parent and Child* by Haim G. Ginott, Alice Ginott, & H. Wallace Goddard (2003)
- *Discipline: The Brazelton Way, Second Edition* by T. Berry Brazelton & Joshua D. Sparrow (2015)
- *The Good News About Bad Behavior: Why Kids are Less Disciplined Than Ever and What to Do About It* by Katherine Reynolds Lewis (2018)
- *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish (2012)
- *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen & Listen So Teens Will Talk* by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish (2006)

PARENTING CLASSES AND PROGRAMS IN YOLO COUNTY

- **CommuniCare:** Parenting and family services. (530) 405-2815 or (916) 403-2970 www.communicarehc.org
- **Family Hui:** Empowering and educational parenting groups. www.familyhuimainland.org
- **Healthy Families Yolo County:** Individualized parent support, home visiting services, and more through Yolo County Children's Alliance. (530) 902-5983
- **Help Me Grow:** Free developmental screenings and connections to resources for children 0-5. (844) 410-GROW www.helpmegrowyolo.org
- **Yolo County Family Resource Centers:** Parenting classes, support, and resources.
 - **Empower Yolo:** Woodland, Davis, and Knights Landing. (530) 661-6336
 - **RISE, Inc.:** Winters and Esparto. (530) 787-4110
 - **Yolo County Children's Alliance:** West Sacramento and Clarksburg. (916) 572-0560
- **Yolo County Nurse Home Visiting Program:** (530) 666-8340
- **Yolo Crisis Nursery:** Support and childcare for children up to age 5 in times of family crisis. (530) 758-6680 www.yolocrisisnursery.org

HOTLINES

- **National Parent Helpline:** Emotional support and referrals to services. (855) 427-2736
- **Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline:** Crisis intervention and information. (800) 422-4453

If you are concerned about your child's development or need more help, contact your child's pediatrician, teacher, or school counselor.

This guide was produced by the Yolo County Children's Alliance as a project of the Yolo County Child Abuse Prevention Council. Learn more at www.yolokids.org/forfamilies

