

INSIGHTS

Don't threaten, bribe or deal – breathe and act instead



Five great discipline habits to add to your parenting repertoire.

Getting kids to cooperate is tricky. One method doesn't necessarily fit all kids so as a parent or teacher it helps to have a broad repertoire of responses to draw on when kids are less than perfect or you want more cooperative behaviour.

Disciplining a child can also make many parents feel decidedly uncomfortable, as it doesn't generally fit an idealised picture of parenting that many of us may have. Discipline is about helping kids stay safe, become social and also be savvy and astute when they interact with others, which makes discipline a positive and very necessary part of the parenting process.

Bad discipline habits

Unfortunately, it's easy as a parent to develop bad habits to get cooperation from kids. For instance, it can be easier to offer a simple bribe such as *"I let you use my iPad for 10 minutes if you can be quiet in the back seat of the car"*, rather than battle with kids for their cooperation. This type of bribe can work wonders to get some peace and quiet and is infinitely better than engaging in a slanging match while you're driving. Well, it may seem that way!

However, it's easy for both parents and kids to become hooked on bribes. As a parent you can easily fall for the trap of offering a bribe to induce good behaviour because it often works. A child learns to cooperate on his terms and soon learns to think, *"What's in this for me?"* Soon kids learn to wheel and deal to get better terms so today's 'quick 10 minutes on an iPad' becomes tomorrow's shiny new piece of technology bought in return for cooperation. Bribery and dealing almost always escalates in scale. The stakes rarely get smaller.

Similarly, idle threats of withdrawing co-operation if a child won't behave well soon falls on deaf ears as kids have a built-in radar for knowing if a threat is real or not. *"If you continue to argue with your sister I'll cancel your birthday"* is the sort of threat that many of us have made in desperation just to get some peace and harmony at home. Again, threatening all types of dastardly consequences can become a habit, particularly when we don't have many other options at our disposal to get better cooperation.

Most of us will default to our lowest level of skill when we are tired, stressed or under pressure. When a child yells, "I hate you! You never listen to a thing I say" just when you're trying to get her to bed you're likely to return fire in spades. "What do you mean I never listen to you! I always listen to you. You never..." and away you go chastising a child in a way that only exacerbates her lack of cooperation.



Good discipline habits

So it helps to develop some good discipline habits instead so that when we do become stressed or tired they are so ingrained in us that they become second nature.

Here are five good discipline habits to develop:

1. Avoid the first impulse so you don't overreact

A good rule of thumb is to stop yourself from reacting when children misbehave. As much of children's poor behaviour is purposeful, in that it keeps parents busy with them or is designed to let parents know that in fact you can make a child do anything they want to do, your impulsive reactions reinforce the behaviour. At times stopping and doing nothing is better than saying something you regret later on or can't follow through with.

2. Step away and take a breath to gain control

When you feel annoyed, angry or hurt by a child's misbehaviour temporarily step away from the situation and take a few deep breaths before you speak or act. This meta-moment will not only buy you time but will quickly calm you down and change your thinking, putting you back in control. Better self-management helps you respond more effectively when kids misbehave.

3. Lower your voice to be heard

Do you typically repeat yourself or raise your voice when your children ignore your request for better behaviour or even cooperation. If so you are training your kids to ignore you. Try lowering your voice rather than raising to be heard. This has the double effect of being easier to hear as well as carrying a greater sense of authority.

4. Move toward them to be noticed

Moving into children's space to deliver a message is usually more effective than issuing an order across a lounge room when you are competing with a screen for attention. It does require effort but the results in terms of getting cooperation is generally worth it.

5. Use a consequence to teach

Not all children respond positively to consequences. Very sensitive children can take consequences personally so use them sparingly with more sensitive. Sometimes a change in the tone of your voice is enough for these children. But generally reasonable consequences that have a relationship to children's misdemeanours and that are respectfully delivered are effective in teaching children to behave responsively. The trick is to deliver them like a neutral cop – cool, calm and with not too many words.

Good habits are best developed in low or no stress situations so if you'd like to add any of these ideas to your parenting repertoire start putting them into practice in every day interactions with your children, so that they become second nature when you really need some cooperation from your kids.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.