INFANT & TODDLER DISCIPLINE: PREVENTING BAD BEHAVIOR

Sometimes adults expect too much from young children. When children fail to behave according to expectations that are too high, they may be unfairly punished. Parents who know a little about how children develop can use that information to prevent some of what seems like "bad behavior" and avoid a lot of frustration. A little understanding and planning make life easier for parents and happier and safer for children.

What Should Parents Know About Infants & Toddlers?

- They have short attention spans. They can’t pay attention for more than a few minutes at a time. Ten minutes for an infant or toddler may seem as long as an hour does to an adult.

- They can only pay attention to one thing at a time and may be easily distracted by other things going on around them.

- They have lots of energy and can’t sit still for very long. They act on impulse—that is, they do something as soon as the idea pops into their minds instead of thinking about danger or right and wrong.

- They learn about the world through sight, touch, taste and smell long before they can understand what we tell them. This is why they put things in their mouths and want to smell & touch everything they see.

- They are learning a lot but often need reminders and practice before a new behavior becomes a habit.

- When they learn something, they may not understand how it fits other situations. Learning it is wrong to draw with crayons on the wall, doesn’t mean they know it is wrong to color on the furniture.

- They believe the world centers around them and their needs. When they want something, they want it now—they have trouble waiting for things.

- Hungry or tired children are more likely to be grumpy and “misbehave” (just like adults!).

- More than anything else, they want to please their parents---they crave attention and approval. Children who don’t get positive attention may decide that ANY attention is better than none at all---even if parents are yelling at them. This can lead a child to misbehave just to get some attention. It’s also a way for children to punish parents who don’t take notice of them. A child who knows how to “push all your buttons” may be starved for some quality time with you.
How Can Parents Use This Information to Keep Infants and Toddlers Safe and Avoid the Need for Discipline?

- Do not place valuable or breakable items within reach. If the child is old enough to climb, keep these items out of sight until she is old enough to understand rules and control her impulses. Do not store small, sharp, or poisonous items in places a child may reach, including unlocked drawers and cabinets or un-attended purses. Safety-proof electrical outlets and keep electrical cords out of sight and reach.

- Make sure infants and toddlers get lots of sleep. They also behave better if they have a familiar routine from day-to-day. Having a familiar routine can be just as comforting as a security blanket or a favorite Teddy Bear.

- Don’t plan grocery shopping (or other important activities) at the child’s nap or lunchtime---remember what we know about tired/hungry people and grumpy behavior.

- If you have an appointment that requires your full attention or privacy, bring a responsible person to watch the baby or leave the baby at home with a sitter. It may be difficult to make these arrangements but it’s unfair to bring the baby along and expect “good behavior”.

- If your child has to “be good” for long periods of time, take along snack foods, drinks and items to entertain your child. Remember, young children have short attention spans so a single toy will only keep their interest for a short time. Keep hands and minds busy so they don’t have a chance to get in trouble.

- When you want your toddler to pay attention or finish a task that takes a little time, make sure there aren’t other things competing for attention. For example, if you want your child to focus on feeding himself, don’t feed him while the TV is turned on, where other children are playing or where there are lots of toys within view. Your toddler will also do better if you are paying attention to him instead of something or someone else.

- When you tell a toddler to do something, give simple instructions---only one or two steps at a time. Instead of telling a young child to “get dressed,” you might tell him to put on his underpants and t-shirt and then tell him to put on his socks and his pants. Instead of telling him to pick up his toys, wash his face & brush his teeth and then bring you a story book to read to him, give him one instruction at a time.

- Give praise and attention to children when behaving well. They are more likely to repeat the good behavior if they know that their parents notice and approve. This can sometimes be more powerful than yelling or punishing when the child is doing something wrong.

- Young children need rules, not reasons: “The rule for couches is that we can sit on them and sometimes we can lie down on them if we take our shoes off but we can’t stand on them or walk on them or jump on them.” When you catch the child jumping on the couch, instead of yelling, “Don’t jump on the couch,” ask in a reminding way, “what is the rule about the couch?” The first time or two, you may have to remind the child of the rule. Then he should be able to say it himself. All of this repetition and “practice” makes it less likely he’ll jump on the couch in the future. When he does repeat the rule, you can tell him how impressed you are that he remembered and thank him for stopping the jumping.

Remember, sometimes what seems like bad behavior on the child’s part is really a matter of unfair expectations or poor planning on the part of the parent.