SAMPLE RESPONSES TO MISBEHAVIOR

Younger children need close supervision. They have a natural urge to touch, taste, climb and explore. It is their way of learning about their bodies and the world around them. They don’t have the ability to control their urges---as soon as an idea pops in their heads, they act without thoughts about right and wrong or about danger. They need watchful adults to put an end to and redirect bad or unsafe behaviors and to teach them rules and reward them when they are behaving well. Older children can be taught the difference between right and wrong, need to learn the reasons for rules, and can be taught values that will help them make good decisions about behavior on their own.

Taking action when a child is misbehaving can be challenging. Is distraction enough? Should we talk about the rules? Should we talk about the reasons for the rules? Should there be a punishment? With older children who want to debate everything, it can be difficult to stay focused on the behavior and avoid getting drawn into side arguments. Some of these scripted responses might be helpful. Of course, parents should use their own words so the conversation sounds and feels most natural.

18-month-old hits new baby sister

Hold the child’s hand and say firmly, but not in an angry tone of voice, “No hitting. Hitting is bad.” The parent might then choose to simply distract the child by giving him something else to do OR may decide to take the child’s hand and show him how to touch his sister in a “good” way. A toddler should never be allowed to be around a baby without someone responsible available to watch them and to step in right away if needed.

3-year-old scribbles on the wall with crayons

If you catch the child in the act, take the crayons away. Tell her firmly but not in an angry tone of voice that because she made the mess, she should help clean it up. Tell her you will do it together---don’t leave her alone with the cleaning materials. It doesn’t matter if her scrubbing is effective, it just matters that she thinks she is cleaning and that you are working together. Afterwards, sit with her and color. Tell her that crayons are only for paper and not for walls or furniture or floors. Children this age should not be coloring or painting or left around cleaning products without someone responsible watching over them.
6-year-old sister picking on and fighting with 4-year-old brother

Give one warning to stop fighting and suggest something else to do (distraction can be a very helpful tool). If the fighting continues, direct the 6-year-old to a “time out.” The time out should last 6 minutes and begins when the child sits quietly. At the end of the “time out,” the child should be able to describe what she was doing wrong to earn the time out and apologize. The parent should accept the apology, remind the child how to behave differently next time and end with a hug. If the fighting happens some place where a time out isn’t possible (for example, in the car on the way to the grocery store), distraction is the best bet. “Who can be the first person to see a red car and how many red cars can we count before we get to the store?”

9-year-old keeps leaving his toys on the living room floor

Set up a “house rule” that toys must be put away as soon as play is finished. Let everyone know the “consequences” for breaking the rule: “The first time it happens, the toy is taken away for a week. The second time, it is taken away for a month and if it happens a third time, the toy is taken away for good and given to charity. Once a toy is taken away for good, the only way it is replaced is if the child pays for a new one. If one child leaves out a toy belonging to another child, the innocent child should not have the toy taken away. Instead, a different toy of the parents choosing that belongs to the guilty child is removed. This is VERY effective if the parent follows through. It may be helpful to keep a list of toys and dates removed so there is no unfairness and no need to have any discussion. (For more information on “House Rules,” see the brochure “Child Discipline” provided by Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital)

14-year-old girl won’t keep her clothes put away and her dresser drawers and closet straightened out.

Tell her how you expect the drawers and closet to be kept and give her a “logical outcome” or “logical consequence” for failure to meet expectations. If she keeps everything put away neatly, you will continue to fold or hang clean laundry and put it away. If she doesn’t maintain order, you will dump all her clean laundry on her bed for her to sort and put away. If you want her putting away her own clothes anyway at this age, the consequence may be that she may have friends in her room if she keeps it neat but may not if it’s messy. Some parents might choose to ignore a messy room as long as clothing doesn’t become damaged or lost as a result and may just insist that the door to the room be kept closed so no one else has to see the mess. It is important to pick your battles with teens. (For more information about “logical” or “natural” consequences, see the brochure “Child Discipline” provided by Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital)

15-year-old-boy is told he is grounded for breaking curfew. He responds by yelling that you are unfair and telling you other parents let their kids stay out later. He asks why you weren’t punished for being 20 minutes late picking him up from basketball practice last week.

It may be hard but stay calm and don’t get drawn into arguments about what other parents do or about a situation from a week ago. Remind him that the rule was clear about the curfew. If he felt the curfew was unfair he could have tried to negotiate a later one ahead of time instead of coming in late. He also could have come home on time or could have decided not to go at all. He had choices and coming in late wasn’t one of them. Tell him firmly that yelling at you and arguing isn’t helping his case. Let him know he can talk with you calmly when he is angry or disagrees but if he continues to speak disrespectfully, there will be consequences for that as well. Once you have settled the matter, if he has a good point about your own behavior (picking him up late), talk it over with him then or later when things have calmed down. You may need to change some of your own behavior. We often learn about ourselves from our children if we take the time to listen. When we apologize for our own shortcoming and correct our behavior, it sets a good example. You may have been late picking him up because of a traffic accident that caused a backup on the highway---something you couldn’t control and for which you shouldn’t be held to blame. The same might have been true when your son broke curfew so be ready to listen and be flexible when indicated. However, if there was no acceptable excuse for coming home late, the punishment for breaking curfew should stand without any further debate.