

JUST-RIGHT DISCIPLINE

Kids sure know how to push your buttons. But the way you respond when they act up determines whether you'll get better behavior next time.

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You've said no—it's too close to dinnertime for a sweet. In fact, you've said no more than once. But when you come back into the kitchen, you find your preschooler hanging precariously off the freezer door with a box of Popsicles clutched in her hand.

Do you explode? Or give in and let her have the pop? Either reaction would be normal because your brain tends to operate on autopilot in stressful situations. "But if you respond in an overly harsh or wimpy way, you miss the opportunity to teach your child the skills she needs to do the right thing in the future," says Becky Bailey, Ph.D., author of *Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline*. It's tough to keep your cool, but it'll be easier to discipline thoughtfully if you've already considered smart responses like the ones on the following pages.



When crossing the street, your 4-year-old won't hold your hand.

Too Harsh "If you can't hold on, I'll pick you up and carry you!"

Too Wimpy "Fine. But please stay really close to me, okay?"

Just Right "When we get to the light, we will hold hands."

Holding hands when you cross the street is one of those non-negotiable safety issues. "This shouldn't be a debate. If she refuses, just take her hand," says Lynne Reeves Griffin, author of *Negotiation Generation*. Even when you threaten to carry her, you still make it sound like she has a choice.

Your 2-year-old snatches a toy train away from his friend who came over to play.

Too Harsh "Bad boy! Give that back!"

Too Wimpy "Come on... please say that you're sorry."

Just Right "You really want a turn, and you're going to get a turn. You and Mommy can play with blocks together, and after we stack up ten blocks, it will be your turn to have the train."

Sharing doesn't come naturally for toddlers—especially at their own house. Don't let your disappointment over your child's "selfish" behavior (or worries about what the other parent will think) interfere with your ability to reinforce the concept of taking turns, no matter how many times you feel like you've covered this ground before, says *Parents* advisor Sal Severe, Ph.D., author of *How to Behave So Your Preschooler Will, Too!* Remind him that his friend is only playing with the train for a little while, and use terms he can understand to explain how long he'll have to wait. When you're alone later, you can practice sharing, to help him appreciate the fact that taking turns doesn't mean losing a toy forever.

You're at the store and your 5-year-old keeps putting sugary cereals and candy in your cart.

Too Harsh "Pull one more thing off the shelves and we leave with nothing!"

Too Wimpy "Okay, we can buy that, but only this once."



Your 18-month-old keeps standing up in his high chair while he's eating dinner.

Too Harsh "That's all—you're done! No more supper for you."

Too Wimpy "Be careful! Come on, sit down now. Look, here comes the airplane spoon flying to your mouth!"

Just Right "We sit when we eat. I'll help you sit back down."

"Parents sometimes think it's better to just distract their toddler or ignore unwanted behavior, but 1-year-olds are old enough to follow simple rules," says Griffin. In fact, your child is probably watching to see your reaction when he demonstrates his new high-chair maneuver. Calmly let him know that sitting is always required at mealtime. If he doesn't get a rise out of you (or a free trip onto your lap for the rest of the meal), he'll take a seat and be less likely to stand up during the next meal.

Just Right "These are the two cereals we can buy. You can choose which one you'd like. If you put anything else in the cart, you have to put it back."

"It's natural for young kids to want these foods—after all, the packaging is designed to attract their curiosity," says Dr. Severe. Since you're focused on your list, your child may be tossing items into the cart in order to get your attention—or to sneak in treats because you're distracted. Keep her engaged from the start by allowing her to make choices about items on the list (yellow

or red apples? chocolate or vanilla pudding?) and let her put things you're buying into the cart for you.

Your preschooler is out of bed again asking for his third drink of water of the night.

Too Harsh "I'm going to lock this door so you can't come out again!"

Too Wimpy "Daddy will lie down with you until you fall asleep."

Just Right "Let's have one final hug and get tucked in. It's time for sleep." As frustrating as this is, try not to let

your child see that you're annoyed. When he pops out, calmly walk him back to bed—and don't give him any snacks or read an extra book unless you want to be doing this every night. He probably imagines that all sorts of exciting things are happening after he goes to sleep; when you make his repeat appearances boring and repetitive, they'll eventually stop.

Your toddler is having a tantrum because you turned off the TV, and she kicks you in the shins.

Too Harsh "That's it. This time you've gone too far. You can forget about watching television—ever!"

Too Wimpy "I know you're upset, but how would you feel if I kicked you?"

Just Right "You hurt Mommy. Let me know when you have calmed down, and we can talk about why you're upset."

"The right response is probably the opposite of what your instincts are telling you," says Betsy Brown Braun, a child-development and behavior specialist and author of *Just Tell Me What to Say*. Rather than punishing her for kicking, just walk away (and take the

remote with you). Separating yourself is a powerful strategy: you won't stay with her if she hurts you, but you won't let her distract you from the original issue. Later on, remind her that no matter what she's feeling, it's never okay to hurt another person. If you get mad and yell at her instead, there's a good chance you'll feel guilty afterward and may even turn the TV back on,

It's time for you to go home from a playdate, and your 4-year-old decides to throw a fit.

Too Harsh "Stop that right now or we're never coming back."

Too Wimpy "We'll stay a little longer."

Just Right "We'll leave in five minutes. Our next stop is the supermarket—do you want to ride in a shopping cart, or push a little cart on your own?"

No child likes to end a fun playdate, so give a warning and change the subject to the next activity. "Offering two choices about what to do next will give him some control over what's going on," says Dr. Bailey. Time is a tough concept for kids, so it's helpful to use a visual cue: Hold your hands out

far apart to indicate a five-minute warning, then move them closer when there are two minutes left, and put them together when it's time to go.

Your kids are screaming at each other and you can't take it.

Too Harsh "That's enough! Both of you go to your room this minute!"

Too Wimpy "Come and tell me what's wrong, and I'll figure out a solution."

Just Right "I don't know what's going on, and I don't want to know, but if you can't work it out quietly, you both need to leave the room."

This is about the noise, not the arguing (at least they're using their words). "Your goal is not to get involved and not to assign any blame," says Braun. "You simply need to remind them to use their indoor voices or take the screaming outside." □

You ask your 6-year-old to hang up her jacket and she says, "I'm busy. Hang it up yourself!"

Too Harsh "Don't you talk to me that way, young lady. Go to your room right now!"

Too Wimpy "Okay, I'll do it this time."

Just Right "In this house, you'll have to lose that attitude. I don't speak to you that way, and you may not speak to me that way. I asked you to hang up your jacket, and I expect you to do it."

There are two issues here—the back talk and the jacket. "If you respond in a tone that shows you mean it, most kids will hang up the jacket," says Braun. "She probably heard another kid talk like this, and she's seeing if she can get away with it." The most important thing to do is take a deep breath, and focus on the good behavior you want to teach her.

