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Consistency in Discipline

Originally by Pat Steffens, Extension Family Life Specialist
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Consistency in dealing with children's behavior is recommended if you want to be an effective parent. Although no parent can expect to be perfectly consistent, some level of consistency is needed for children to learn the lessons of social life and feel self-assured. Children learn appropriate behavior easier when learning conditions remain constant. Parents should consider at least four aspects of consistent discipline.

Consistency from Situation to Situation

Results are predictable. Your predictable and consistent behavior gives children a sense of security. Children should not have to figure out what parents are going to do next. If rules are consistent, results of disobeying them will be predictable.

Enforcement is important. The importance of a rule is learned by consistently having it enforced. A child who is disciplined for throwing the ball in the living room on Monday but not disciplined for the same action on Tuesday will be confused. This confusion results in children not understanding the reason for rules or principles. Consistent enforcement of rules and following through with consequences for misbehavior tells the child that rules are important.

Consistency Between Parents

Set common rules. Parents should agree on how to discipline their children. To become reliable to children, both parents must be consistent in dealing with similar situations. Disagreeing with each other over upbringing can create a confusing situation for children.* As one child complained, "Mom tells me I can stay up and watch television, and then Dad says she shouldn't allow it."

*When partner abuse is present in the parental relationship, trust and consistency are not present. The non-abusive parent must consider the child's safety and well-being as a priority. Manipulation, threats and put-downs are common forms of abuse directed toward a spouse and/or children. Ask for help.

To avoid this type of situation, disagreements are best resolved when children are absent. Inconsistency between parents causes children to play one parent against the other. When parents disagree, children quite naturally go by the easiest set of regulations. It is best for all involved when parents decide on a common set of rules.

Consistency Between Command and Example

When teaching good behavior, parents should "practice what they preach." Children learn values and beliefs more by examples adults set than by verbal instructions.

Screaming at a child to be quiet or paddling a child for hitting is not effective. Decide what is important and what parental response to use to teach your child. It would be more effective to calmly tell your child to be quiet or use "time-out" when a child is physically aggressive.

Consistency Between Verbal and Nonverbal Messages

Frequently the message a parent sends is not the message the child receives. The little boy who said to his mother, "Your mouth says you love me, but your eyes say you don't" received a mixed message. The words told one thing while nonverbal cues suggested the opposite. Mixed or double messages leave a child confused. Parents need to be sure they aren't sending inconsistent messages.

Allow for, and expect, change. Parents can't always be perfectly consistent from day to day or situation to situation. Parents' feelings, children's feelings and specific details are constantly changing. Sometimes your common sense will help you decide when bedtime rules should be modified or table manners relaxed. As children grow and develop, rules and how you deal with them will change. The rules for a 4-year-old will be different for the same child at age 6 or 8. Some rules will be the same, others will be modified or abolished, and new ones will be introduced.

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**Index: Family Life
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