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## NF93-154 Effective Ways to Guide Children

Pat Steffens

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## Effective Ways to Guide Children

*Pat Steffens, Extension Family Life Specialist*

Parents sometimes wonder about the best way to deal with their children when they misbehave. Instinctively, they may respond to a child as their parents responded to them when they were young. This may be good...or not so good, depending on how they were raised.

Children don't always mean to misbehave; sometimes they have not had the life experiences to know how to act in socially acceptable ways. They need guidance from a caring adult to help them learn how to behave appropriately. Parents can use the following strategies to become more effective in guiding a child's behavior.

- **Use "time out".** Have children rest or play apart for a time when they fight, squabble, hit, or keep irritating one another. A rule of thumb is one minute of "time out" for each year of age. Being apart for a while lets them calm down and correct their behavior. Then you can use other ways to encourage better behavior.
- **Manage behavior.** Talk calmly with children to learn what happened, why and how they saw the situation. Talk about ways to deal with the problem. Come to a solution that's agreeable to both you and the child. This helps children learn to be responsible for their behavior.
- **Provide redirection.** When children get into trouble, stop them. Explain why you are stopping them, and then suggest another activity. Asking children what they would rather do helps them focus on an alternative and gives them some control to make a better choice. When children scribble on the wall, give them paper and crayons. When they race dangerously indoors, take them outside for a game of chase. When children throw books at each other, gather them for a story time or organize a beanbag toss. This demonstrates appropriate behavior and works especially well with young children.
- **Promote a sense of responsibility.** When children cause trouble or hurt someone or something, expect them to take responsibility for their actions. If they make another child cry, have them help with the soothing. If a child spills milk, provide a cloth to clean it up. If they break a toy, help them fix it. Children will not take responsibility if adults keep doing for children what they can and should do for themselves.
- **Ignore it.** The best way to deal with misbehavior aimed at getting your attention is to simply ignore it. Give adequate attention to children when they behave well. Children need attention for good behavior, not misbehavior.

- **Make rules impersonal.** Present rules in impersonal terms. Then, if the children feel any conflict it will be between themselves and the rule; not between you and the children. Instead of saying, "I don't want you drinking grape juice in the living room," remind the children, "The rule is, food and drinks in the kitchen only, please."
  - **Be firm.** Clearly and firmly state that children do what they need to do. Do not use a wishy-washy tone of voice. Speak in a tone that lets children know that you mean what you say, and that you expect them to do it! Being firm does not mean yelling, threatening, reasoning, or taking away privileges. Being firm works for any age child and for many situations.
  - **Be brief and clear.** The more often you repeat the same message, the more children tune you out. As a child starts outside for playtime, you need say only one word: "Coat!"
  - **Offer choices.** Instead of yelling, "Pick up every toy on this floor right this minute," it is more effective to ask in a matter-of-fact tone, "Would you like to start picking up toys on this side or over by the window?" (Notice how a true choice differs from a threat like "Would you rather clean this room or lose TV privileges?")
  - **Stay in control.** If you don't approve of something a child does, act before the situation gets out of control - before you become angry and overly frustrated, and before the child's behavior becomes unreasonable. In other words, "Keep your cool."
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