

The Six Principles of Effective Parenting

SPECIFIC

CONSISTENT

IMMEDIATE

FREQUENT

BALANCE

MEANINGFUL

Specific: Telling children you want them to behave well in general often has little impact. Being specific about expectations increases parental effectiveness. Telling a child that he or she needs to clean his or her entire room can often be overwhelming. Being specific can save you a lot of arguing later about whether the chore was done adequately. For example, telling a child to put his or her clean clothes in the drawer is clear, direct, easier for the child to understand, and often increases the likelihood that the child will comply with the parent's directive. In addition, being vague with threats of discipline, such as, "You will be in big trouble if you do not clean up your room," can be confusing for a child and will most likely result in noncompliance. However, by telling the child that he or she can choose to put all of his or her Legos in the box, or he or she can choose not to put the Legos away and will then be choosing to miss TV for the evening, the child then has a clear understanding of the rules and his or her options for making a good decision. Families that have vague rules are more likely to have children with behavior problems.

Consistent: If you tell your child that he or she must always eat his or her vegetables before having dessert, your child will likely cooperate with this rule most of the time if you consistently enforce the rule and the consequence. If you are inconsistent with this rule, your child will most likely test you looking for the chance you will make an exception to this rule. The more exceptions you make, the more likely your child will not take you seriously the next time you try to enforce the same rule, or even the next time you try to enforce a different rule. By establishing consistency, you are communicating to your child that you are in control, that you mean what you say and you expect compliance, and that you are a trustworthy parent. Nobody is 100% compliant, but this is an important goal to strive toward because it can make family life so much simpler and easier. In addition, when parents are consistent, children are then able to predict how their parents will respond when discipline is necessary, making children feel safe and secure.

Immediate: The more immediate rewards and praise are given, the more effective they tend to be. Some children, especially young children, may not see the connection between their behavior and a delayed reward or consequence. Providing immediate rewards or consequences helps children make the connection between their specific behavior or action and the resulting reward or consequence.

Sometimes, however, when a parent is aware that he or she is feeling stressed and overwhelmed as a result of his or her child's inappropriate behavior, it is important that the parent take some time to cool off before giving a consequence that may potentially be too harsh, extreme, or inappropriate.

Frequent: It is important for parents to pick their battles and not target every problem behavior at once. It is important for children to feel success in order for them to be motivated to behave better. Parents can motivate their children to behave more appropriately by choosing only a few of the most problematic behaviors to focus on at a time, and offering frequent praises and rewards when a child successfully follows a rule or chooses to engage in more appropriate behavior.

Balance: The use of a "bank" metaphor is helpful in explaining this principle.

Discipline, consequences, and criticisms represent withdrawals from the bank, and positive praises and interactions represent deposits into the bank. Parents cannot successfully discipline or make withdrawals if they are not *first* building a positive relationship with their children and making deposits. Although disciplining children is necessary to teach children right from wrong, if parents are spending more time having negative interactions with their children, the parent-child relationship will become emotionally bankrupt—children will be dramatically less likely to comply with anything the parent requests. It is strongly encouraged that parents strive to have at least 4 positive interactions with their children for every 1 criticism or consequence. This ratio can produce remarkable improvements in children's behaviors.

Meaningful: Rewards or consequences that are effective for one child may not be effective for another child. It is important for parents to take the time to find out which rewards and which consequences work the best as motivators for that particular child. In addition, sometimes children become bored if they receive the same reward or consequence repeatedly. It is often helpful for parents to vary the rewards and consequences they use over time—be creative!