

## Teaching Self-Discipline

### Setting Limits for Young Children

Discipline is teaching. A child is not born knowing what is appropriate and what is not. As adults, we help children learn what behavior is acceptable. The way you communicate limits to your child is important. Here are some suggestions:

- It's better to be consistent with five rules 100% of the time than with ten rules 50% of the time. Most adults set too many rules.
- A rule should be:
  - For ensuring health and safety
  - Reasonable for a child's age
  - For the benefit of children as well as adults
  - Explained to the child
- Be clear and specific in your instructions. Avoid terms such as "be nice" or "be good." Say instead, "We will go when you are in your car seat, We'll read the story after you brush your teeth. I'll help," "People are not for hitting. Use your words," or "Put your toys on this shelf".
- Eye contact is important. Move close to the child and get on his or her eye level.
- Use a firm, matter-of-fact but kind voice.
- Be trustworthy. Say what you mean. Do what you say you will.
- Do not get personally involved in the situation, for example, saying, "You did this to make me mad."
- Say things in a positive way, such as, "Your feet go on the floor, not on the chair."
- Be brief. We often talk too much. Remind once, and then calmly move on.
- Allow the child to express his or her feelings, including negative feelings.
- Listen when your child talks. A child is more likely to listen and obey when the parent listens to and values the child's feelings and opinions.
- Show your child you are trying to understand by using "reflective listening." Respond by "reflecting" your child's feelings; for example: "That really made you mad when I told you we couldn't go outside but it's raining," "I know it's hard for you to understand why I need to hold your baby sister so much."

## **Teaching Self-Discipline Setting Limits for Young Children**

- Give your child choices when you can. Give only choices you can accept. Even simple choices will help your child feel more in control and therefore, better able to cooperate.
- Be in tuned to your child's feelings, moods and needs. A tired or hungry child is less likely to be agreeable.
- Avoid the use of labels such as good, bad, dumb, etc.
- Nagging, yelling, and hitting show a lack of respect for the child. Work to develop a relationship of mutual respect.
- Time limits often help reduce a child's frustration. Say, for example, "In five minutes it will be time for dinner." The child may not have any understanding of the concept of five minutes, but you are letting him or her know what is coming up.
- Keep your expectations for the child reasonable for his or her age.

**Remember! You communicate nonverbally as well.  
Facial expressions, actions, tone of voice and hugs often  
communicate more than your words to influence a child.**

For more information  
call your [County Health Department](#).

[MCH Early Childhood Development and Parent Education Program](#)