



by Karen Stephens

The Fundamentals: 7 Steps to Well-Behaved Kids

Maintaining a positive attitude while guiding children's behavior can be a tough job. Keeping key phrases in mind, like, "Say what you mean, and mean what you say," can steer you in the right direction. But spouting positive phrases and putting them into practice are two different issues. Like most things in life, it's easier said than done.

Saying what you mean, and meaning what you say is demanding, exhausting work. The physical work of parenting, the cooking, cleaning clothes, keeping a roof over everyone's head is simple in comparison. Dealing with children's behavior is far more draining, especially when emotional turmoil erupts amidst children chronically pushing or outright ignoring limits!

When kids of any age defy you, it's often easier just to let them have their way — to give in to their lack of ethics and sometimes outrageous demands. It's easier to avoid a scene and public embarrassment, easier to conserve your energy for other things. It's easier not to take responsibility, easier not to hold kids accountable. But easier isn't better, right, or in kids' best interests.

Letting kids get by with inappropriate behavior has devastating results. Children who aren't taught to obey are a thorn in the side of parents, neighbors, schools, and the workplace for years to come. And the kids are done a lifelong injustice.

One of the best things for children's self esteem is to learn they can cooperatively live with others in a congenial, mutually satisfying manner. It builds kids' self confidence to master constructive, positive social skills. It gives them a sense of being welcomed into a community, a sense of belonging and self worth. But they can't acquire that state of well being unless parents have the stamina and fortitude to teach codes of conduct and then expect children to follow them.

When kids are allowed to do anything they want — to get what they want, such as throwing a fit or hitting someone — they are learning a profound lesson, and not a constructive one. When obnoxious behavior is indulged, rather than nipped in the bud, kids are essentially abandoned. I don't care if kids are allowed to run wild because parents are too tired, too lazy or too unskilled, the result is still emotionally abandoned kids. They deserve more. We all do.

The best way to help children follow social rules is to say what you mean, and mean what you say. This requires acute self awareness. It demands that we stay in check with our emotions and true goals for kids. It requires us to have a clear picture of what we expect of children. Even harder, we have to be able to communicate that vision clearly and consistently.

The first step in guiding kids should be prevention. Go back to basics. If kids aren't well rested or regularly nourished, they become cranky and obstinate. It's self defeating to take tired or hungry kids anywhere. Snacks, drinks, and a reasonable schedule go far in preventing most behavior problems.

But despite the best laid plans, behavior problems can crop up. It's only natural; it happens in every family, so don't feel bad when it happens in yours. But do deal with it. Here are suggestions for dealing with challenging situations.

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1. *Set clear expectations and limits. Be specific about desired behavior.* Telling kids to “Be good” or “Be nice” or “We don’t do that” is way too vague. Children need very concrete and understandable directions. Focus more on what kids CAN do, rather than always on what they can’t. Phrases such as, “You may build in the sand,” or “I expect you to walk inside the petting zoo,” immediately focus children’s attention on what to do. When directions are specific, kids don’t have to translate vague innuendos such as “act right” or “straighten up.” And they don’t have to waste energy putting up defenses to thinly veiled threats like, “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll knock it off.”
2. *Teach and role model proper behavior.* For instance, before allowing a child in the sandbox, teach her how to use the toys and how to build. Ask her to watch others playing appropriately. But the best way to teach safe sand play is by getting into the sandbox and playing along. (You get to pretend you’re playing for the kids’ sake and not your own!)
3. *Anticipate temptations or opportunities for inappropriate behavior.* Children’s basic nature is to explore and experiment. They like to test things out. Usually it’s okay, but their inquisitive nature can hurt themselves or others. Because of this, it’s smart to anticipate what they might do. By anticipating inappropriate behavior, you can address it without the emotion of a power struggle. For instance, while teaching about sandbox play, point blank tell the child, “Sand is never for throwing.” Be specific about keeping the sand inside the box. (At first, a few reminders will be necessary for younger and inexperienced children.)
4. *Explain reasons behind expectations and limits.* These should only need to be stated when children are first introduced to an activity. Tell kids in the sandbox, “Others have a right not to have sand thrown at them. Sand in eyes and ears hurts!” Say, “We work hard for a pretty lawn. Sand kills grass, keep it inside the box.”

Whatever the circumstance, follow through on the consequence.
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5. *Whenever possible, contemplate consequences for behavior before a problem occurs.* So they do more good than harm, consequences should be reasonable, respectful and, whenever possible, related to the specific misbehavior. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to guess that kids might push the sandbox limits for tossing a shovel full of sand just for fun. Think ahead and your response can be immediate.
6. *Communicate consequences for appropriate and inappropriate behavior.* In no uncertain terms, tell children specifically what will happen if they choose to disobey or be disrespectful. “If you choose to throw sand, you’ll leave the sandbox.” And of course, some sand throwers will sit like a ton of bricks and refuse to leave. With resolve say, “You may walk, or I’ll carry you; but you threw sand and you’re leaving the sandbox.” If kids protest and cry, “I won’t do it again, I promise,” don’t back down! Respond firmly that you made your decision and they’ll have a chance to prove themselves another day.
7. *Respectfully and consistently enforce consequences with loving, steadfast resolve.* When kids disregard expectations, walk your talk and do what you said you would do. Each and every time, do it. Whatever the infraction, whatever the circumstance, follow through on the consequence. It’s better to do something than to ignore defiant behavior.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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