



Disciplining Abused and Neglected Children

Childcare providers are encouraged to use nonphysical forms of discipline. This restriction is important since it provides children with non-punitive ways of working out problems. Many children who come to care situations have been or are being abused in their homes. If their childcare providers discipline them the same way, they may wonder what it is about them that is so bad. They may also begin to believe that the only way to solve problems is to strike out. The restriction on physical punishment can create a problem for childcare providers who may have reared their own children by spanking them. It may be difficult for caregivers to find alternative methods of discipline, but it helps to remember that there is a good reason for it. Those who have used spanking before need to know what else will work for them. It is like any habit, once a person decides to change, he or she must find a replacement. The attached handout provides examples of positive/safe discipline techniques, as well as examples of negative/unsafe techniques.

Most abused children feel bad about being hurt, but may not talk about it. Many were told not to tell. Instead, they may act in ways that seem strange, often called, "action language." Such children are trying to express their feelings and get help for themselves in the only way they know how. It is vital that caregivers keep asking themselves, "What could she be trying to tell me?" or "What could he want or need right now?" When it comes to children, **there is always a reason for every behavior.** One child recently placed in foster care came to his new daycare center so scared and angry that he let the family's pet bird out of the cage. The child had found a way to say that he felt he had no control over his life, just like the bird in the cage. Although the family was upset, the caregiver tried to understand the child's actions by looking for the feelings he was trying to express. They told the child that they were very sad to have lost their bird but that they understood how difficult and scary it was for him to be in a new home and a new center. The child cried, let the caregiver give him a hug, and apologized for the incident. The caregiver was able to see beyond the action to the child's feelings.

Some children have known only criticism and abuse, which to them is familiar behavior. If they do not receive criticism, they may feel unloved and they may even provoke a caregiver into treating them in ways that they know. They may watch to see what kinds of behaviors make the caregiver most angry, and then do them. It is important not to fall for the bait, but rather to see the child's actions as asking for love and acceptance. Eventually, after some testing, the child will begin to learn new ways.

It is not unusual for abused children to want to fight physically. This is what they may have seen and learned as an alternative to solving problems. It is very important to set limits and to make sure that violence is not allowed. Caregivers may have to set limits over and over again. If children are destructive of property, themselves, or others, caregivers must intervene immediately, explaining to the child that they care about him/her and do not want to see the child hurt themselves or others. Do not allow such behavior, and if it persists, recommend the child see a therapist.

An abused child may be sensitive to being rejected or abandoned. They may feel afraid that if they misbehave, the caregiver will send them away, hurt them, or worse, not like them anymore. It is best to set up situations in which positive behaviors are rewarded and recognized and, whenever possible, misbehavior is ignored.

Disciplining children is not always easy. Some children resent being told what to do. Yet children also feel more secure with structure. They like to know the consequences of their actions and sometimes test caregivers just to see where the limits are. When the structure is clear and the limits are reliable, children feel safe. This may be in stark contrast to the chaos of their home environment. The old myth that caring for children is instinctual is simply not true for everyone. Most people need all the help they can get with this challenging job. The more

caregivers learn, the more skills they will develop; the more they see positive results, the better they will feel about themselves and about the children they provide care for.

Positive / Safe Discipline Techniques

- Giving choices (empowering to children)
- Explaining calmly/giving a directive and setting limits
- Distracting, redirecting (works well with young children)
- Modeling (showing by your example)
- Time-out (avoid using the corner, which is shaming; place the child where you can see him or her)
- Natural consequences, example: if the child plays during a meal, then meal time is over and s/he will need to wait for the next regularly scheduled meal.
- Logical consequences, example: if the child leaves the bike out, s/he can't ride the next day
- Charts to track behavior, example: "star" charts for positive behaviors
- Contract agreements (works best with older children and teens)
- Reward positively: give praise for positive behavior
- Remove privileges, example: the child loses television time if he or she doesn't do homework
- Change surroundings/prevent problems, examples: putting up a baby gate, getting a bucket for all the toys
- Remove items that cause problems
- Ignore self-indulgent behaviors (like whining and pouting; but do not ignore the child's needs)
- Restitution, example: requiring child to do yard work after tearing up the flowers
- Negotiation/family decision-making meetings (bringing common problems to the family and problem-solving together; making agreements that include the children so they are more invested in the outcome)

Negative / Unsafe Discipline Techniques

- Poking with the hand or an object
- Hitting with a hand or an instrument such as a spoon
- Slapping
- Shoving or violent shaking - shaking a young child can cause brain damage!
- Grabbing, jerking
- Smacking with a hand, belt stick or other object
- Beating
- Putting substances in child's mouth such as soap, hot sauce, etc.
- Yelling and screaming
- Verbal and nonverbal threats and put-downs
- Anger that threatens
- Power plays
- Shaming
- Scolding and extreme "nagging"
- Pinching, grabbing ears
- Intimidating with looks, actions, gestures
- Criticizing, name calling
- Isolating the child (with the exception of short time-out periods)

Adapted from foster parent training materials, DHS/Child Welfare by the Children's Center.