

# Basic Tools for Guiding Young Children's Behavior

Children need adults to teach them important life skills. They need to know the rules — what is okay and what is not okay. As a child care provider, your knowledge about how children learn and grow will help you guide children in ways they can understand at each age level. For example, a two-year-old has limited understanding and needs a lot of redirection, but a five-year-old can learn to be a good problem solver. Here are some basic tips for guiding children's behavior. Remember that different strategies work best at different ages.

**Keep rules simple and easy to understand.** Discuss rules with children and write them down. Consider children's suggestions for rules. Repeat the rules often.

A few rules that work well with children include:

- We help each other.
- We take care of our toys.
- We say please and thank you.
- We are kind to each other



**Say what you mean.** Use do's instead of don'ts. Choose your words carefully, especially when you are guiding children's behavior. Keep sentences short and simple. Focus on what to do rather than what not to do.

**Try saying:** Slow down and walk.

**Try saying:** Come hold my hand.

**Try saying:** Keep your feet on the floor.

**Try saying:** Use your quiet voice inside.

**Instead of:** Stop running.

**Instead of:** Don't touch anything.

**Instead of:** Don't climb on the couch.

**Instead of:** Stop screaming and shouting.

**Talk with children – not “at” them.** Children often don't hear you when you are talking (or shouting) “at” them. You will be much more effective if you get down on their level, look them in the eyes, touch them on the shoulder, and talk with them.

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**Set a good example.** Children watch you all the time. They see how you talk to other children and adults. They see how you cope with anger or frustration. They watch how you deal with sadness and joy. They listen to how you say “I’m sorry.” The way you handle the ups and downs of life teaches children a lot about how to behave and get along with others.

**Encourage children to set good examples for each other.** Children also learn a great deal from each other. Encourage appropriate ways to share, play, and be kind to each other.

**Give clear, simple choices.** Toddlers can choose between a red cup and a green cup. Preschoolers can choose between playing “airport” and “zookeeper.” Give children a choice only when there is a choice. For example, saying “It is nap time, do you want to lie down now?” is not really an option if your rule is that everyone will rest at nap time.

**Show respect for children.** Talk to misbehaving children in private, remind them of the reasons for rules, and discuss what they can do differently.

**Catch children being good.** All children want attention. It is better to give them positive attention for good behavior than negative attention for misbehavior. Comment on something positive about each child each day. Better yet, strive for several times a day.

**Praise like a good coach instead of a cheerleader.** A cheerleader just shouts general praise: “What a great job!” or “What a beautiful picture.” A good coach tells you what you’re doing right, uses praise as a teaching tool, and lets you know why he or she is proud of you. If a child sets the table, you might say, “You did such a good job setting the table! You put the spoons and forks in the right place and remembered the napkins!” When you look at a child’s painting you might remark, “This painting just glows with color! You used blue, green, red, yellow, and orange. Tell me how you did this?”

**Share the good news.** Remember to share children’s good behavior with others. When children have done something good, mention it to other children and to parents.

**Use play activities to teach children social skills.** Use children’s books that show how children resolve problems. Play “what if” games. Become a character in children’s pretend play and show children how to use good manners and be kind to a doll.

**Teach children how to resolve conflict and problem solve.** Help them recognize feelings, identify the problem, come up with ideas for solving the problem, and try possible solutions.

**Teach children how to apologize.** Learning how to apologize is a skill. Young children have a hard time understanding another child’s feelings, but by the time they are 4 years old they should begin to recognize that apologizing is a good way to make up for hurting someone else. Teach preschoolers and school-age children the four basic steps of apologizing: look at the other child, say the child’s name, say “I’m sorry,” and say why. Keep it simple: e.g., “Lucas, I’m sorry I hit you.” With time and practice, children will not have to be prompted, and their apology will be more genuine.

**Teach children how to correct the effects of their behavior.** For example, if a child marks on the wall, give him/her a wet cloth to clean it off.