

# 805 LIVING

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Kids  
COVER TO COVER

## MODERN-DAY DISCIPLINE

Tired of all the whining? Try these expert tips for more effective parenting.

**HAVE YOU NOTICED** that people go on endlessly about how well-behaved yesterday's children were, and how bratty today's are? Have you noticed yourself agreeing that there's (gulp) some truth to it?

As a parent of two preschoolers, I'll be the first to say that it's pretty humbling to try to tame a 2-year-old, much less a teenager. But I'll also admit that I've changed tables at a restaurant to get away from other people's kids. It seems that parenting today is riddled with perceived perils that make discipline a lot less clear-cut than it once was: Will punishing them too harshly hurt their self-esteem? What will they tell their therapist about me in 15 years?

Dr. David Swanson, a clinical psychologist who treats families, children, and teens with ADHD, defiance, anxiety, and related issues, explains that many parents feel guilty about the time careers take away from family. We try to make up for lost time by not hurting the child's feelings when we *are* together, but that can mean putting a child's immediate happiness before more important long-term concerns. "Those dynamics combined with today's media access—all this creates a lot of chaos and a lot of stress," says Swanson.

Faith Golden, a behavior specialist and founder of It's Aparent Parenting & Behavior Specialists, which conducts in-home visits to help families (she has been compared to TV's *Supernanny*), agrees that parents today have problems setting limits and keeping their cool. And while setting limits is imperative for bringing up well-adjusted children, keeping your cool is necessary not only for parenting effectively, but also for modeling appropriate ways to deal with stress.

Here are their expert tips for implementing effective discipline and creating a home environment that supports healthy family dynamics.

**Set clear limits.** "The thing I see in every house I go into is that parents are trying to be their kids' friend," says Golden. Because parents often say no to a demand, but then give in later, Golden claims that kids learn that their parents don't mean anything they say. It is, she says, plain old conditioning. (The same child will listen to a teacher the first time if it's clear that there will be consequences at school.) While your child might appear happy when you give in, it can actually be pretty confusing for them. "Children will push parents until parents give them the structure they need," Golden says. "They need us to guide them, teach them how to live in this world of ours."



**Maintain a healthy schedule.** Setting limits also means deciding what you and your kids have time for. Swanson urges parents to set up a very consistent structure in their home with some built-in buffer times so nobody's overscheduled. He also warns against seeing your kids as an extension of your own success; view them as the individuals they are. When prioritizing time, he urges following the simple idea of business before pleasure, meaning that you and your children should take care of things that are an obligation (schoolwork) before those that are a passion (playing with friends). "If you stick to that every day, they never think about it," says Swanson. "Over time, they won't have such a hard time."

**Use natural consequences.** A correction should fit the incident, if possible. Some examples: "If they spill the milk, they clean it up," Golden says. If a young child doesn't come to you when you call them, physically move them where you want them to be. Soon, says Golden, they'll get the idea that you mean what you say. While time-outs will work for many kids, Swanson notes that no one method fits all. "A child who has control issues will turn around and thank you for the break; maybe early bedtime for them is the thing," he says. "It's important for parents to find out who their child is and what's effective."

**Be consistent.** Swanson points out that kids are less likely to challenge you if you're consistent. So by being tough now, you'll actually have it easier in the long run. It'll also make your kids feel more secure to know that the rules are set rather than ever-changing. They won't have to guess what's expected of them, and they won't have to push to know the limits.

**Head off bad behavior.** Golden says to give your kids positive attention so they're not clamoring for negative attention, and to offer them choices rather than dictating everything in their lives. "Once they're old enough, you give two choices: 'Do you want to wear your red shirt or blue shirt?'" she says. "That way, they feel like they have some power, they don't feel like they need to fight back as much."

**Let them grow up.** Some parents might be surprised to know that they're actually doing too much for their kids: Golden says that so-called "super-parenting"—when parents do every little thing for their children—is damaging. "It denies kids the ability to grow up; when a child is ready to do something, we let them do it." So don't be hesitant to turn over the reins when they're ready to dress themselves or make their own snacks. They'll feel good about having more control in their lives, and might even act out less.

**Be aware of outside influences.** "Sleep and diet definitely connect to behavioral problems," says Swanson, adding that so do allergies, school stress, home stress, and the media. Swanson notes that even cartoons can portray bad behavior and attitudes that kids will model, and certain video games can be even worse. "If you're going to let your kids watch something, look at it," he says. Golden believes that watching an age-appropriate TV show or movie together as a family can be a good way to connect, especially if you talk about it afterwards. It's a way to share your values and let your kids voice their opinions, too. For the same effect, Swanson suggests board games, dinner, or taking a walk together as a family.

**Nurture your marriage.** If parents aren't on the same page with each other as far as discipline goes, their children will likely misbehave because the rules aren't consistent. The kids'

bad behavior can then cause fighting between parents, continuing the cycle. "I insist that parents go on a date at least once every other week to rekindle romance; without that initial bond you have no family," Golden says. As she has worked in-home to help families put good discipline practices into action, Golden has often been thanked for saving a marriage, too. But it doesn't always work out that way. "If the parents are divorcing, do everything you can to keep discipline the same in both houses—no good-time dad or good-time mom," says Golden. "Children must have stability all the time, but especially in a crisis situation."

**Take care of yourself.** While the mechanics of parenting—punish bad behavior, reward good behavior—are pretty basic, it's not easy for stretched-thin parents to maintain the calm necessary to pull it off. "Parents lose it when their feelings are hurt, when they feel fatigued, or when they feel ineffective," Swanson says. To combat such feelings, he recommends that parents do something to recharge their batteries—whether it's time to exercise or time to socialize.

**Eat dinner together.** Worried that you're not connecting with your kids? "Families should sit down every night and have dinner together," Golden says, adding that dinner is a daily venue for conversation.

Being consistent about discipline isn't easy, especially where bad patterns have already taken root, but the benefits are endless: Children grow up to be self-sufficient adults, able to make good decisions because they have learned how to weigh choices and anticipate consequences from early on. And maybe someday, a few decades down the line, they'll look back and think we did a good job. A mother can dream, right? ■

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## Resources

Dr. David Swanson of Swanson, Conti & Associates (818-986-9666; [www.swansoncontiantandassociates.com](http://www.swansoncontiantandassociates.com)) has a new book out this month, *Help—My Kid is Driving Me Crazy: The 17 Ways Kids Manipulate Their Parents, and What You Can Do About It*. Dr. Swanson also publishes a free newsletter for parents that addresses such topics as sleep issues and talking with your teen; visit [www.thehealthychild.info](http://www.thehealthychild.info). In addition, he has posted videos on YouTube.com (search "Child and Family Minute").

Faith Golden of It's Aparent Parenting & Behavior Specialists (818-222-2606; [www.itsaparentparenting.com](http://www.itsaparentparenting.com)) provides in-home visits that assess and tackle discipline issues; she also conducts classes.

Bette Levy Alkazian, a licensed marriage and family therapist and parent and family coach who runs *Balanced Parenting* in Westlake Village (805-230-2464; [www.balancedparenting.com](http://www.balancedparenting.com)) offers many services for families, from in-home visits to in-office sessions, classes, teacher training, and even a monthly coffee hour at Chocolatine in Thousand Oaks.