



## Responding helpfully when a child crosses a line

Your daughter refused to brush her teeth. Later, she called you a name when she did not like a rule. Your son threw a lengthy tantrum when you denied his request, and he brought some inappropriate words home from the playground. Seeking independence and testing the limits are normal parts of growing up, and these are not necessarily causes for alarm. Rather, we can see these as opportunities—chances to teach appropriate behavior, self-discipline and effective alternatives.

When our children's behaviors cross a line, we should explain this to them. We should make clear what was wrong with their actions, and describe a more appropriate choice and the reasons this choice is better. Our discussions can include validating the hard feelings behind our kids' behaviors, and teaching them how to talk about these feelings rather than acting out.

However, our children will still sometimes repeat their misbehaviors. We are then left wondering how to react.

Among the greatest desires our children have is attention from us. They will put great effort into getting our attention, and they will experiment with doing so through both desirable and undesirable actions. Thus, a guideline in choosing our possible responses is to increase the energy that we give to our kids' positive behaviors and to greatly reduce the energy that we give to their negative behaviors. In this way, we can help to shape our children's actions so they become more responsible, effective and kind.

One of the ways we can do this is by noticing and praising examples of our children's good behaviors. Praise is most effective when it includes three specific components:

**First, be precise.** Rather

than saying, "Good job," it is better to say, "When I asked you to hang up your jacket, you did so right away."

**Second, use high energy.** We should certainly give much more energy during praise than we do when telling our kids that we are displeased. It is easy to accidentally get this backwards—putting the stronger energy into reprimands. So it is worth reminding oneself of this guideline.

**Third, use touch.** Praise should not be done from across the room. Instead, it should include a kiss, a hug or a pat on the back.

In addition to praising their good behaviors, we can limit the energy that we give for our kids' misbehaviors in various ways. For example, look for natural consequences rather than giving punishments. When Jill will not brush her teeth, maintain a calm voice, and tell her, "No problem. You can skip brushing if you would like. However, we can't have snacks on the days when we don't clean the sugar from our teeth." When you see Billy intentionally jump in the mud after being told not to do so, have him take time rinsing, wringing out and hanging his clothes to dry, and then cleaning off his shoes.

When your children refuse chores, simply let them know this is fine—they can do the chore whenever they choose. However, make clear they cannot do other things until the chore is done. Then, each time they reach for something or start a conversation with you, simply reply that they can do so only after they complete the chore.

If your child is yelling, you can give a time-out—to yourself. "This noise is bothering me. I'm going to go to my bedroom for a while." This eliminates giving any attention at all to the child who is yelling. Rather, you are speaking to yourself and then removing "the audience" from the yelling child.

When your child chooses the

wrong words: "You're a bad mommy," you can reply simply by providing a better choice: "Mommy, I'm angry you won't let me go outside. I don't think that is fair." In this way, instead of getting upset with your child, you are teaching him how to express feelings more appropriately. You are teaching the vocabulary of emotions.

There are countless more examples. However, the pattern

remains the same. Explain to your children how they crossed the line. Give energy only to the positive behaviors. Teach your kids better ways to express their feelings. If your children continue to show a pattern of misbehavior, it may be time to call a psychotherapist. However, in most cases their conduct and attitude will become progressively more positive.

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