

126 03/25/02 Consistency is key to parental discipline

Within the same week, two young mothers asked me a question about three-year-olds and discipline. Their children were responding to parental discipline with temper tantrums, back talk and defiance. The mothers were not sure how to handle this new aspect of their children's natures.

We hear so much about the "Terrible Twos" that misbehavior in a child who is three years old surprises many. Most children experiment with defying their parents at each stage in their development. It is not until they are making their own decisions that defiance ends!

It is vitally important to establish with your child that you are the boss. As a high school counselor, I heard many parents say that they could not control an adolescent son or daughter. That lack of control did not begin during the teen years. It began with the child who successfully defied his parents when he was a toddler.

How does a parent establish that she is the boss? Decide ahead of time what the rules will be. Inform the child of the rules and the consequences for disobedience. Then, when the child is disobedient, administer the consequences fairly, calmly and consistently.

Consistency is the key. Suppose that you tell a three-year-old that he will have a timeout if he hits his brother. The first few times that he breaks that rule, you put him in timeout. Then a time comes when you do not follow through with the promised punishment. Immediately, that little three-year-old mind begins to calculate how he can continue to misbehave and avoid punishment.

Being inconsistent in discipline frustrates a parent because the child's misbehavior escalates. It also frustrates a child because he does not know where his boundaries are. Children without boundaries feel insecure. That insecurity leads to misbehavior as they search for the boundaries.

Give your children the security of strong, consistent discipline. You will both be happier.