

INSIGHTS

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Why consistency improves kids' behaviour

One of the simplest ways to improve a child's behaviour is to be more consistent.



Children love their parents to be consistent as they are able to predict how they will act. A consistent approach to discipline helps put kids in control of their behaviour.

Consistency means as parents we follow through and do as we say we will. It means resisting giving kids second and third chances when they break the rules or behave poorly around others. When we let kids get away with two or three infractions of the rules we often come down very hard eventually, which causes resentment. *Act early and prevent poor behaviour from escalating is the best approach.*

Consistency also means both parents in a dual parent family get their act together and respond in similar ways when children are less than perfect. Children learn from a young age to play one parent off against the other when their standards differ or communication is poor. Sole parents need to be consistent with how they react when children behave poorly.

A consistent approach is shown through a clear set of limits and boundaries that provide kids with structure and teaches them how to behave. Studies show that families with very few boundaries or rules are more likely to have children who behave poorly around others, or don't consider their own safety.

Children like limits and they also like to push against boundaries. One study has shown that kids will push parental boundaries about one third of the time. This is a normal, but irritating expression of a child's push for independence and autonomy. Some toddlers, teens and other tricky types will push twice that amount, which is very hard work indeed.

Consistency is often sacrificed by busy parents and put in the 'too-hard basket'. When parents are tired, stretched and overworked the last thing we want to do is engage in a battle with a strong-willed child over what are sometimes petty issues. Besides, consistency can make a well-meaning parent who values relationships feel downright awful.

But giving in rather than holding your ground is not a smart long-term strategy. If you give in occasionally kids will learn that if they push hard enough, or give that winning smile, you will eventually give in. Consistency is about being strong. It takes some backbone to be consistent.

Here are some ideas to help you be consistent with your kids:

- 1. Focus on priority behaviours.** It's difficult to be consistent with every single misbehaviour, but it's easy to focus on one or two. When you are consistent with one or two priority behaviours it has a positive impact on other behaviours.
- 2. Give yourself a tangible reminder** about the behaviour you want to follow up. Leave a note somewhere telling yourself that you need to "Walk away when a child whines. Don't give in." Or "Catch your kids doing the right thing when they resolve a problem without arguing."
- 3. Check your routines.** Make sure you have simple routines for troublesome times of the day such as bedtime or mealtimes.
- 4. Act** rather than overtalk or repeat yourself when kids misbehave. Sometimes it's really inconvenient to set a consequence, as you may have to battle a tantrum that follows. But the stand-firm approach pays off in the long-term as kids learn eventually that you mean what you say, and say what you mean. That's what firm, consistent discipline requires.
- 5. Agree to a joint position** with your partner about a range of parenting issues such as discipline methods, going out, the use of technology, alcohol, sexuality and other important areas.

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