



by Karen Stephens

Clear Expectations Help Kids Behave

“Behave.” “Be good.” “Cut it out.” “Act your age.” “Straighten up.” “Stop that.” “Keep it up and you’ll get what you’ve got coming.” Do you say these things to kids — over and over and over? Parents often wonder why these reminders and threats have little impact. One reason is that kids don’t always have good short term memory. It’s worse when they’re tired because their brains can’t process short term memory as well as they can when well rested.

Another reason is that it takes practice for children to adjust their behavior to parents’ expectations. Gradually, they must develop the concentration skills and self-discipline needed to obey. That can be hard because their ceaseless curiosity bounces their attention from one thing to another, in spite of what you just said. Often children innocently forget. I don’t believe they intentionally drive us crazy. Well, most of the time anyway

Children also misbehave because we grown ups just don’t communicate clearly enough. Think about it. All of the phrases I used to begin this column are extremely vague. When we say them our tone conveys anger, frustration, or impatience, not clear direction.

To help children behave, parents must first be good role models. It’s common sense not to curse at home if you don’t want your three year old to curse at gram’s!

Children also need verbal guidance. The way you communicate with them should be based on their age and language ability. The younger the child, the more you’ll need to speak with inflection and facial expressions. Your statements need to be shorter and simpler.

Communication is an art of parenting that takes practice. It’s hard to think fast on your feet while on the firing line; but it can be done!

Following are basic tips on clearly communicating expectations to children. Tailor these ideas to your individual family situation as well as to your child’s unique temperament, behavior, and style of interaction.

Be specific about expectations. Focus on what children can do, rather than on what they can’t do. Examples: “Throw the ball outside.” “Climb the tree using both hands.” “Walk inside the house.” “Talk quietly while we’re in the church.” “You may drive your toy cars on the floor.”

Tell children the function of an object. Examples: “The horn is for blowing into. You may not hit your brother with it.” “Crayons are for coloring on paper, not the wall.” “Chairs are for sitting on; you may not use one to climb.” “Blocks are for building, not throwing.” “The table is for our food. Put the cat on the floor.”

Give children reasons for expectations. Examples: “I want you to be safe crossing the street. I expect you to hold onto my hand.” “Use kind words with grandmother so you don’t hurt her feelings.” “When you drive your big wheel

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into the door, the glass could break. I expect you to ride on the driveway.” “I never want to lose sight of you. Walk right by my leg when we are in the store.” “Other people don’t like to buy food a stranger has touched. Please use only your eyes to admire the fruit.” “Keep your hands by your side when we walk down the dish aisle. If you break a glass I have to pay for it.”

Respectfully share your feelings about behavior. Examples: “I’m scared when you jump off the couch; you could get hurt. You may jump outside.” “I’m frustrated when you color on my new wallpaper! Next time, color on your paper.” “I’m disappointed when you spill juice all over the new clothes I gave you. I expect you to sit still at the table.” “I’m embarrassed when you scream at me. Tell me what’s wrong in a calmer voice.”

Communicate expectations, offer choices, and then move on without haggling.

Empathize with your child’s feelings. Examples: “I know you’re having lots of fun and don’t want to leave. But I’ve made my decision, we’re going home.” “It can be scary flushing the toilet, but it has to be clean for the next person.” (Oh, come on, don’t laugh. This can be a daily battle for parents trying to potty train their twos!) “I understand you get tired of doing the dishes, but we need clean ones for breakfast.”

And here’s one for parents of teens. “You’re disappointed and angry you can’t go to the party. However, I wouldn’t feel like a good parent if I let you go where alcohol might be present.” In the very next breath you’ll have to say, “I don’t care what other parents are letting their children do; I expect you to find a more suitable activity.” I always liked adding this touch: “And it’s not fair of you to make me feel like all the other parents are better than me just because they’re letting their child go to the party.” It works — sometimes.

Communicate expectations, offer choices, and then move on without haggling. Examples: “We’re going home to get your school clothes ready for tomorrow. Do you want to ride in the front or back seat?” “It’s hard to get moving in the morning, but you still need to wear clothes. Do you want to put on the blue or green sweatshirt?”

All of these communication techniques are most effective with toddlers on up. And yes, I really have seen 18 month olds respond to clear verbal direction, as long as it was accompanied with plenty of nonverbal sign language, too. You know, you sit on the floor with the toy cars showing the child that is where they can be driven.

These child guidance strategies take more time and thought than snapping “behave” or threatening a child. At first, you’ll feel awkward and wordy. If you persist, eventually they will become second nature. I’ve seen these techniques put into action by parents and teachers with very constructive results. It’s respectful and gives children much more support and guidance than the vague standbys.

To explore ways to enforce expectations consistently, refer to Parenting Exchange articles “Consistent, Clear Consequences Motivate Cooperative Behavior” and “Reliable and Predictable Discipline: Tips for Enforcing Consequences.”

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.