

What Positive Discipline Tool to Apply When

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Introduction

When a person first starts learning about non-authoritarian (“positive”) ways to deal with their child, it can be difficult to know which parenting “tool” to apply when. This is an attempt to bring some clarity to this. At the end will be a chart, designed to be a one page reference. Contained in the text are the different tools and the problems parents typically face with the parenting tool that may solve it.

How to organize was a challenge. At first I wanted to say “These are the top 3 tools have them ready at all times to use.” But there really aren’t just three. I also had thought to say “Use the gentlest technique possible, advancing to stronger ones if necessary.” This has some truth to it, but some situations get highly emotional in a matter of seconds, and a strong reaction on the spot may be needed.

Instead, the pattern that arose was “Bring everything back to a state of calm.” The solution usually matches the problem: If your child is upset from a minor scrape, holding them close may be all that is needed, but if your two kids are hitting or harassing each other, you may need to step in and physically separate them immediately. “Minor” problems need minor reactions, and major problems need major reactions.

In defense of the “Bring everything back to a state of calm” principle, it can also be used to gauge your effectiveness as a parent: Fighting or enraged emotions are a sign that something is awry and new solutions are needed. Is this not what is desired: To have things go mostly smoothly? This is what goes through my mind all throughout my day as a mom: Getting things back to calm. This does *not* mean that I demand of my children to stop whining and “put on a happy face.” There are ways to deal with children such that everyone, including them, genuinely feel their needs are met, and, thus, calm is brought to the house.

To be sure, there are a lot of parenting tools available to a person. Traditional parenting is often thought of as a scale with very lenient and lax parents, who rescue their children from most of life’s problems, on one end, and strict parents, who push achievement and other perceived ideal behaviors at the expense of a child’s feelings, on the other end. I like to think of positive discipline as cutting off the extreme ends. Parents do not “rescue” children from typical life problems, and they also don’t use strict punishment as the authoritarian parent would. But in between are many parenting tools that can be used, and some of them are very gentle and others are more firm. What tools you use will reflect your own personal style. I don’t mean to tell you how to handle your children in all situations, but to bring some clarity to some of the tools and when they might apply.

The way to organize this article that made the most logical sense is to go through the stages of a problem, from 1) The preparation you might do to **prevent** problems to 2) Dealing with **current** problems on the spot as they arise and 3) The cleanup that might have to happen **after** a problem has dissipated.

There is a slight bias in this article towards younger children. The tactics below apply especially well to toddlers and preschoolers. They still hold true throughout most of early childhood. Some tactics that apply to preteens or teenagers are briefly described but not explained in depth. The below sets the foundation of positive discipline: How to deal with your child without blame, pain, shame, nagging, threats, and so on.

Prevention of Problems

The tools used here are a lot of role modeling, practicing skills, and stating your expectations. They help for almost every “In the Moment” problem, so these are not categorized, but simply listed.

A prevention of problems is where a Montessori system of education really shines. Montessori described “the most important” aspect of her system of education as “Normalization.” **Normalization** is when the child is allowed to work on something of their choosing independently and it brings calm, focus, and discipline to the child. This is one of the major keys in dealing with a young child especially, which helps to prevent the “Terrible Twos.” Whatever it is the child likes to do, let them. My son liked building train tracks and he liked playing in “dirt,” a sensory bin I set up for him that also had trucks in them, among other things. He did these things for many minutes, sometimes perhaps an hour or more. As a parent, being aggressive about understanding child development and what their new abilities are goes a long way, in fact may be the very key to having a happy child. I did not find the twos to be “Terrible,” nor did I find the age of 3 to be insufferable, and I think the activities I always had for my kids were key to that. In the words of a man I knew, “Keep them busy.”

Another enormously helpful preventative measure is as found in Montessori schools, which is to let children **Practice Many Life Skills**, such as putting on their own clothes, brushing their teeth, washing their hands, and so on. This goes a long way in getting children out the door, when dealing with all of the moving parts that there are in taking children anywhere—or doing anything, really. Without any stress whatsoever, children can practice simply washing their hands or practicing with a zipper. When my children could learn to walk, I would walk with them around the block and physically move them back to the sidewalk, to show what was expected. I never had a problem with them running into the road.

Learning about how Montessori taught young children how to do things can be very enlightening to a parent. There are a couple components that makes this up, but collectively I consider this skill set to be **Coaching**. If you can learn how to do this, you lose a lot of the angry, barking orders that you might otherwise use on your child. You *will* have to teach them skill sets, regardless of in-the-moment problems that arise, so this is a preventative measure. The skill sets involved are: A Control of Error, Breaking up Skill Sets, and Cutting Things Down to Size.

In Montessori, there is a **Control of Error** as the children do their activities: a measure to tell them if what they are doing it right or wrong. They get good at it and can accurately do it when necessary. I have used this idea of the Control of Error as a powerful technique. For instance, when cleaning up, we do an “Inspection” of the room. My toddler at the time loved this. I would draw his attention to what made the room “clean”: Books were put away in their spot, his trucks were put away, clothes were in the laundry basket, etc. Children need this strong guide of what is “wrong” and “right,” said or demonstrated in a way that resonates with them. This can probably be considered a sub-component of **Strong Expectations**.

Another important part of the Montessori system is **Breaking Skill Sets Up Into Their Component Parts** so children can learn them. You do what any coach does, which is to isolate individual skill sets, then put them back together as an entire system later. To teach a child how to pour from a cup, you might let them scoop and pour water in the bath tub first. When learning to put on shoes, you might start with “croc” style of shoes, which have no Velcro, to master putting the shoe on and off at first, then try a

Velcro shoe later. This type of coaching / control of error, done in a stress-free environment before being asked to do them in real situations, helps with many problems later.

Similar to Breaking skill sets up, probably a sub-component in fact, is “**Cutting Things Down to Size.**” Montessori noticed that children like *small* things. When I was asking my son to clean up, who was barely 3 at the time, I noticed he would be unfocused and distracted when there were 10 or more blocks out, but as I cleaned, and there were only 5 or 6 blocks, he put them away with gusto. How many times I have known parents ask their children to do something that probably feels gigantically impossible! Children need small, achievable tasks. If you aren’t getting anywhere, keep cutting back on the complexity of what you are asking until something clicks. In Montessori, children are never corrected when they mistake. Instead, they go back to a less complex level of training until they auto-correct themselves.

Beyond Montessori, a tactic that seems to be universally loved by people is to **Compliment Positive Behavior** as it happens. If your child closed a door gently, notice it, possibly thank them. The core of my parenting philosophy is observation, hence the title of the book series and blog, “The Observant Mom.” Watching what the child does is a constant activity that goes towards many benefits.

Many authors who advocate non-punitive discipline encourage you to **Discuss Emotions** with your children. For instance, for everyone to tell their happy and sad parts of the day. This has been very powerful for us. Many times my son said, “I was sad that [my sister] got hurt”—knowing full well he hurt her. If you are ever worried that your child isn’t getting the message, even though you are not punishing them and demanding they apologize, this happy/sad part of the day may prove very enlightening for you. My son showed genuine remorse, without any prodding or guilt on our part, in activities where we discussed our emotions. Understanding emotions will help them as they manage their own behavior and react to the behavior of others later.

And of course, **Role Model** desired behavior. Neuroscience continues to prove that humans have strong “mimicking neurons” (see *The Whole-Brain Child*) and really are more likely to do as you do, not as you say.

In-The-Moment Problems

I organize this section based on the different types of problems parents typically encounter, generally from easy to difficult. I have, so far, identified four major problems a parent is likely to encounter. They are:

1. Children Doing Something (Non-Aggressive) That You Don’t Want Them To (“Stop” Behaviors)
2. Crying
3. Gaining a Child’s Cooperation (“Go” Behaviors)
4. Stopping Childhood Aggressive Behavior

Children Doing Something (Non-Aggressive) That You Don’t Want Them To (“Stop” Behaviors)

A typical problem a parent might encounter is a child who is doing something the adult doesn’t want them to. Children are very curious and want to try their hand out at many things. What happens when I

use this crayon to draw on the wall? Children don't know what is allowed and what is not. As an adult, I don't even know what is allowed and what is not. When we go to different houses or have different caregivers around, they all have different behaviors that they find acceptable. How can a child be considered "bad" when one adult would tell the child they can't climb up a tree, meanwhile another is rooting them on, admiring their athletic talent?

How would you handle the following situation: A child is lacing garland through the railing for your stairways, getting much weaving practice in, but it is scratching up the railing and leaving red marks? I'll ask the same question at the end of this section.

A powerful tool to use in this situation is Redirection. **Redirection** is finding something that is similar to what your child is doing, but you find acceptable. If they are drawing on the walls, give them a piece of paper and let them draw away. A friend once described this as "Do whatever keeps the creativity flowing."

Redirection works even with behaviors that parents may find egregious, such as hitting—when they are hitting only for the fun of hitting, not out of aggression. For very young children, who inevitably will hit or bite someone out of curiosity, you can simply redirect their attention. Let them high five you or hit something that is appropriate, such as a hammer toy. For an older child that keeps wanting to take the ball from others, get them involved in a sport. After all, in most sports, the object is to get the ball!

When my son was jumping on a dining room chair, I told him he can't jump there but he could jump on the trampoline at gymnastics, something he was hesitant to do every time we went to the gymnastics center. To my total surprise, the next time we were there, he jumped on the trampoline! A negative got turned into a positive! This redirection thus also acts as observation for you as a parent, and the task of keeping up with your child's ever growing needs: Your child's "bad" behavior is a glaringly obvious sign they are in need of more challenges.

Redirection has been blasted by some as "not being direct enough." Let me tell a story that shows the message *does* get through. My son was smashing things he shouldn't (some other toys.) Without explaining that it was wrong to smash the certain toys he was smashing, I got some wood blocks and told him, "You can build a tower and then smash it." He said, "It's OK to smash blocks, but not toys." He *got* the message, without me even saying it.

If I had to pick only 3 tools to use, Redirection would be on the list. It has the characteristics of many other tactics: You are acting, instead of lecturing the child; and it also serves as its own "Positive Timeout," where the child is effectively removed from a potentially intense situation. I like that the mindset is "We really want the child to be engaged and do what they love. It just needs to respect everyone and everything else." It's respectful, effective, and easy to understand. It doesn't work in every situation, but it does work in a lot of situations.

Another way to deal with a child doing something they shouldn't is to **Describe How You Feel**. I like this one especially, because it handles so eloquently different care givers different expectations for how a child behaves. For instance, once my young son was jumping on me and then jumping on his dad. I told him, "I don't like when you jump on me. It hurts me." As it turns out, his dad thought it was great fun. After I said this to him, instead of jumping, he climbed carefully on me, and then went over and jumped into his dad's lap, to both of their delight. Had I said "NO JUMPING!", as if it was an obvious, universally

applied rule, this fun with his dad would have stopped. Parents don't need to put up a "united front" with their children. It is completely acceptable that some parents have different ideas of how they want to be treated. This is a healthy thing: It begins to teach children that each person has their own preferences, truly developing a more individualistic mindset, sure to help them in many careers. This starts with describing how *you* feel, not how *they* need to change.

Giving Information is always valuable. If they are jumping on the couch, point out that the couch may eventually wear. There have been times when *I* have become enlightened because another caregiver has explained, in technical detail, why doing something might be dangerous. Give reasons, not orders.

If the above things don't work or are not your style, why not simply ask the child to stop doing something? Too many times adults, with irritation in their voice, yell at a child to stop doing something, when the child was never once asked to stop, explained why they should stop, told they were hurting someone, or asked to do something different. It is *not* obvious that what you don't want the child to do they shouldn't do.

Now how would you handle the child weaving garland through the railing, leaving red marks? This actually happened. My husband, having just looked at the chart I provide at the end that I share with him, told my son what was happening with how it was making red marks. He then gave him another fun activity that he could do, to keep the fun and the learning going.

They are crying

How would you handle the following situation: You are out, it's late, your child is hysterical and wants milk, but it has to be in a white cup, and all you have is a yellow cup.

A crying kid, can I brag, is my specialty, perhaps because my entire philosophy is "Bring everything back to calm." The most important part about a crying child is to *never, ever lecture them or demand they do anything while crying or upset*. The goal is always to get past the tears first, before *any* lectures, guidance, or demands. You will notice my chart below has, as its second question, "Is the child calm?" This step cannot be skipped. If a child is not calm, they need soothed.

I am completely opposed to those who demand that their children "Use their words" while crying. This is a huge task to ask of a child, particularly a small child. I see it as the parent's responsibility to soothe their child, or at least to stop making demands of a crying child. This is called different things by different people. In *The Whole Brain Child*, Dr. Siegel calls it "Connect Then Redirect." Dr. Ginott describes it as "Bad emotions need let out before good emotions can come in." Dr. Siegel describes it perfectly, as if you are a "lifeguard who brings them back to shore and put your arm around them before telling them not to go out so far next time." "**Soothing**" seems like a good way to describe it, and here are some specific tactics to accomplish it:

First, your child's feeling are valid. **Validating Their Emotion** is one of the most crucial things you can do as a parent. Whether they are crying from a fall, thunder, a spat with a friend, or a failed test, do not diminish their emotion. They are not "making too big of a deal about it." Just listen, and reflect back to them their emotion, giving them the terminology to deal with what they are going through—in the words of *The Whole Brain Child*, "literally letting them come to terms with their emotion."

I have found with my very young children that the majority of time that they cry, other than having gotten physically hurt, is when they can't get something they want. My favorite tactic to use in this situation is, from Dr. Ginott, to **Give in Fantasy What You Can't Give in Reality**.

When I first read this, I wanted nothing to do with it. It seems so Fake. But it works. It works exactly in those situations where the child wants something, but you can't give it.

Once, my 2 year old wanted the steering wheel of the car. He wanted me to detach it and give it to him. I happened to have pen and paper near and I drew him a steering wheel. If anything, this at least distracted him and calmed him down. Or once, we were at Epcot and my son wanted to ride a particular ride, but it was late, and we had to go. I tried some other tactics but what clicked, and what always clicks in this situation, is when I gave him in fantasy what he can't have. I tried some other tactics (which I need not bother with in the future), and finally asked if he wanted to talk about the ride. He sniffled, "Yes." I carried him and talked all about the ride, as we peacefully went to our car.

I use this idea of "Giving in Fantasy What You Can't Give in Reality" to make subtle changes in how I speak to my children. Instead of saying, "We'll be at the restaurant in TEN MINUTES. You just have to WAIT!", I tell my child, "I am going *as fast as I can* to get there! I know you are so hungry!"—and I continue at normal pace to get to the restaurant. The first statement lectures the child to wait and stop complaining. The second statement recognizes their urgent desire to get to the restaurant. This alone usually works, but if desired, you could add something like, "I wish I had a flying car so we could get past all of this traffic!"

It is usually obvious what the child wants, but sometimes it is not. In this case, **Curiosity Questions** can help. Direct questions tend not to work with children, especially if they are upset. As an adult, imagine you are upset, and someone shines a bright light in your face and demands, "What is wrong? Use your words!" Now imagine someone throws you a cup of coffee, and first asks how your day is. With a child, just imagine the conversation. The child is crying and you are asking "What do you *want*? Is it milk? *What!?*" and they just keep crying. Instead, some fishing around can do the trick. For a child crying, you can start guessing at what the problem is. Through tears, they might point to something and open up.

Another helpful thing is keeping a **Database** in your mind of your child's experiences. One time we were leaving a mall, I had bags and a baby in my arms, and my 3 year old had a meltdown. I had no idea why at first. Then I remembered the train at the mall. He had ridden it the last time we went and not this time. I finally asked, "Did you want to ride the train?" He again sniffled yes and we again talked about this thing we couldn't do.

Now for the child who wants a white cup and you only have a yellow cup. This also actually happened. I can just hear most parents, "**BUT THE COLOR DOESN'T MATTER!!**" I had already read about giving in fantasy what you can't give in reality, and I had to work really hard that night to find something that clicked. Finally what worked is when I told him I wished there was a *big planet* that was a *gigantic cup* and it was *filled with milk* and the cup was WHITE and we had a rocket and we were going to BLAST OFF to go to this planet to get the milk in this BIG WHITE CUP. He laughed, took the milk, and we peacefully went home.

Gaining a Child's Cooperation ("Go" Behaviors)

Your child is peacefully doing something, but you need them to do something, say, put on their shoes. This one seems like it should be easy, but it's often not.

How would you handle this common situation: The child needs a bath, but won't get in the bathtub. Or another one: They won't clean their plate from breakfast and put it on the counter. One more: They won't open their mouth to brush their teeth.

To gain a child's cooperation, first, I always try to prepare the child ahead of time of what is about to happen. It is unfair to spring things on children.

One extremely effective way to get a child to stop playing and come do something you want is to say, "You can do **One More Fun Thing** and then you need to put your shoes on so we can go." I find this is much more effective than telling them, "You have 5 minutes!" A young child especially doesn't know what "5 minutes" is. The fun thing is something they have control over—and is usually much shorter in time than 5 minutes. One time my son said, "I am going to flip this truck over!" And he flipped the truck over. I asked, "Is that your fun thing?" He said yes. And he happily left the place we were at with me.

Too many adults expect children to do as they ask, instantly. Really, it's rude. If someone asks you to do something, do you feel the expectation to scramble and do it right then? No, most adults may say, "Alright, I can do what you ask, but first I need to put this away and then I'll be right there." I work all of my magic on my children, telling them ahead of time what I want, using language they understand, and then I give them a few minutes to let everything sink in. If they seem completely distracted, or like they completely forgot what was asked—because, hey, whatever they were doing certainly was fun—I give short, simple reminders. This is the tactic of **Using Few Words** or perhaps it can be called **One Word Commands**. I may tell my son to do one fun thing and then he needs to put his shoes on. If he does his fun thing, then does more things, I say, "Shoes." And then I say it again, "Shoes." Using one word makes it less nagging. It's a reminder; it's all it is. If I could give **Reminders** without using *any* words at all, I would. And I am reminded that, when a child is older, this can work. For instance, one book recommends to put their plate at breakfast upside down, as a reminder they need to do their morning chores before eating breakfast. As an adult, I can say I much prefer wordless or short reminders of what I need to do, rather than, "Gosh you are such an idiot! Did you leave the milk on the counter AGAIN!?"

Using **Clear Labeling**, which may also be considered a "**Strong Expectation**" can work really well. Once, I routinely had to pick up my son from a place. As I left, I had a diaper bag, a lunch box, and a baby in my hand, and my son. He was routinely stubbornly refusing to follow me to the car. After the first difficult day, I started to bring chalk with me. I drew a big "X" in front of where I parked. I told my son I had a fun game: to go find the X. When he did, he had to stand right there while I loaded the car, waiting for him. This worked beautifully for all of the other times I had to pick him up.

When I think of a small child, I think of a being who doesn't quite understand fully all of the adult language, customs, and expectations, and who gets completely lost in the fun things he or she is experiencing for likely the first time. Gaining their cooperation requires a very strong explanation or demonstration to show them exactly what you want, making that "bullseye" of what you want clearer and clearer. All the threats in the world won't help them have clarity. Be patient, consistent, respectful, and clear, preferring, in the word of Dr. Ginott, gestures to words; one word to sentences; sentences to

paragraphs and so on. See also the “Prevention” section to practice those things you might expect of your child, which will give you insight into what you can reasonably expect them to do.

Now for situations where you are clear as a bell but you still have trouble getting their cooperation.

My favorite tactic in this situation is to **Give a Choice, such that Inaction is not a Choice, then Act**. For short, this is often called “**Act, Wordlessly**.” I’ll give an example. You need your child to get in the car seat. You can say “You can get in the car seat or I’ll put you in.” Then, if they don’t do it, wordlessly, you pick them up and put them in the car seat. Yes, even the Positive Discipline books say it is OK to do this. In fact, they trumpet it. One said, “75% of problems would end if parents acted instead of talked.”

I especially like giving the child choice at first, with inaction not being a choice. It gives them the opportunity to do it on their own, and it gives them a warning about what’s to come. Many times, giving them that little advance warning with a little bit of time for them to act brings out of them what they are really thinking. My son might say, “But I want to go in through the trunk.” Assuming it’s OK with the parent, problem solved.

I also like this one because I never, ever don’t follow up on my word. It is not a threat. A real threat sounds like this: “Get in the car seat or Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny aren’t coming and you’re not going trick or treating!” Parents do say this type of thing, and they never have actual plans of executing it. Children quickly realize parents are full of empty talk. “Get in the car seat or I’ll put you in” is always followed up on. Just a few times and your child gets the message—a message they get “loud and clear” after you did something without saying anything at all.

One tactic that I think is over rated is giving a child “limited choices.” This may work best for an older child. I find it may *or may not* help gain cooperation. Whenever I would ask my toddler to pick a spot on the floor to get dressed, his answer was “Chase me!” I tried using it once when my son went through a stage where he didn’t want to get dressed, by letting him pick out his shirt. It really didn’t work. It can be very aggravating to wait for a child to make up their mind if cooperation is the goal. Giving the child a limited choice is an important part of giving the child control over their life, but I would only do it in times of relative peace, where time is in abundance, and one of the acceptable choices is no choice at all or the choice is irresistible to the child, such as picking out what of several favorite movies to watch, that they are certain to make a choice. If cooperation is the goal, and it is mandatory they do something, the choice needs to be followed up with action.

If you give the child choice, whatever the child picks has to be acceptable. How many times have I heard parents lecture, “I need you to make the right choice right now,” as they try to force their child to share a toy. If the child genuinely does not have a choice, don’t give them one. Don’t try to hide coercion under the guise of “choice.”

If you physically can’t move a child and the child outright refuses to do something, or if they are obviously traumatized to do something (I would never pick up a child and make them do something they genuinely feared), using a **Pleasant Distraction** can work. One time my son, then not even 3 years old, locked himself in a public bathroom stall. I can just hear most mothers, “Open this door this instant!”—to a child who has every bit of control in that situation. I told him I would tell him about his favorite story at the time, which was completely irresistible to him. He let me in instantly. I have told many stories while buckling my child into the car seat.

Routine charts can work wonders for something that you expect of your child daily. *I* need routine charts. When I take on a task that I have to tend to something daily, such as watering a plant, I am really not very good at it. I tend to forget, or, if it's muddy or rainy out, I tend to not do it. Setting up a routine chart for myself, reminding me of everything that needs done, is how I handle it. This is a loving way to remind your child of all that needs done. They work great at bedtime. Our bedtime is brush teeth, one book, some talk, then bed. You can get the child involved in setting up the routine if you'd like. Bedtime is less than 20 minutes at our house.

Using a child's own **Self Interest** can work. A child is much more likely to do something if the result of doing something benefits them. An example may be putting on sunglasses. I put my son's sunglasses, umbrellas, and sweaters, in bins or racks near the front door. I have let him experience weather without the protection of these things and then with. He has then felt, for instance, that a sweater keeps him warm in the cold. For the longest time, he refused to put his sunglasses on. Once, while on a walk, the sun was in his eyes the whole time, and he commented about it almost the whole way. From that incidence forward, he often went to get his sunglasses when he noticed it was bright out.

For an older child, **Problem Solving** can work. Problem solving works when there is a persistent problem that keeps distressing everyone. Every person involved in the problem sits down and brainstorms solutions. No judgment is passed on any idea. Even if the child says, "We could send my sister to the moon," that suggestion is written down. Then you negotiate out a workable idea. At the end, the child sees how problems can be solved, and how somewhat silly and laughable "sending your sister to the moon" is.

Something that can work, though in a very limited way, is what I loosely think of as **Deal Making**. This is a deal: Before we go on a bike ride, you need to clean up your blocks. At first, this seems like a threat. But here is the trick: It is *optional* to go on the bike ride. It is also optional to clean up the blocks. If ___ you want to do something, then ___ these are my conditions. As long as you are OK with either choice the child makes: If they don't clean up the blocks or not, and the resultant stated consequence, this tactic can work. I see it used at schools daily. Before children can go out to play, they might have to sit on a circle, nicely. The children all do. I actually use this tactic often, and I have to sometimes remind myself to use it. My son may ask to watch a clip on Youtube. This is a great opportunity, because I may say, "Well first you have to clean up the 3 toys in the play room." The older my son gets, the more I can ask. And actually, the "deals" are best when the "reward" is something the child initially asked for. When they ask for something special, demand just a few things from them before they get this extra privilege.

Back to the original three examples: The child that won't get in the bathtub, the child that won't clean up their plate, and the child that won't open their mouth to brush their teeth. I am sure you can imagine, these are real situations for us. I purposely gave three, because the situation gets more complex to gain cooperation.

To get into the bathtub, I may say, "Get in the bathtub or I'll put you in." Usually my son may say, "But I want to get a [certain toy] first." Problem solved.

To get my son to put away his plate, we have, with masking tape, a section taped off on our counter for where his plates go. Everyone must respect to not put other items here. (Clear Labeling.) We practiced and role modeled putting his plate away by doing it with him often. Where he eats is also a work area

for him. So when he goes to play with play doh, but his breakfast plate is there, he has a strong incentive to put it away (Self Interest). Now, it has become very routine for him to put his plate away.

For a child refusing to open their mouth to brush their teeth: You can't physically force them to do it. You can't use the give a choice, then act approach. I mainly used a Pleasant Distraction. I usually told my son about something fun that happened that day or his favorite story at the time. Brushing teeth also becomes routine after a while and the child knows to expect it will happen.

Stopping Child Aggression

This one is the worst. A child hits another child, takes their toy, throws something at the television. We finally adopted three rules in our house: No hitting; No taking; and No throwing. I am not totally sure that having these "Three Rules" is really working. Anyway.

When a child is aggressive, even unintentionally, this is usually when parents can get very angry. A very real trigger for me is if my son hits his baby sister, especially if I was doing something at the time, such as going to the bathroom. There is a very real feeling of "I can't even go to the bathroom!" You feel taken advantage of and guilty at the same time. Other triggers are when something breaks or coffee spills. One of the first orders of business is handling inevitable parental anger.

I read once that the average emotion lasts 90 seconds. So, to deal with this, I set out a timer, up high, that lasted 2 minutes. The idea was that, if angry, I go flip it over, and don't act until the two minutes are over, which is a **Positive Timeout** (for parents in this case). I did this, once, and it did help. It was after my son did a flip on the couch and knocked water over, which got all over several electronic gadgets. In the two minutes, I tried cleaning up. As I was doing this, my son kept hitting his sister, which were setting off more triggers in me. I probably should have done nothing, except be with the kids, though the spill did need cleaned, and the sooner, the better. But in that time, I did start to think of ways to handle it, other than flipping out. I used storytelling where I flipped my son over, to show him how he hit the water, and how he had to be cognizant of his feet. I drew the problem out on a piece of paper with "P" for the problem and "S" for possible solutions, as he was not reading yet. We decided mom can put glasses of water away and my son could stop jumping on the couch. Admittedly, the timer keeps getting moved from its original position, and I have not been able to rely on it, other than to think in my head to try to stay calm.

There are some books that say it is OK to say something like, "I am so angry that your toys are all over the floor right now. I could pick them up and throw them outside!" The problem for me is that *saying* something like this leads too easily to *doing* it. It does not calm me down. If it works for you, then use it. Perhaps I am using it incorrectly, but I will just say: It should only be used if it brings the situation back to a state of calm. I do sometimes just describe my feelings, calmly, if I can muster it: "I am very sad this [really important item to me] got broken."

For me, I need a lot of prevention to stop anger. If I am going to the bathroom, sometimes I just need to bring my infant in with me, so her older brother doesn't hit her while I am in there. Semi-frequent reminders simply to remain patient in situations; that better solutions are always found if you are calm, also help. My chart below has, as its first step, to ask if the parent is calm. This is for a reason. This step cannot be skipped.

I have found that **Describing the Situation**, including your feelings, can help. “Alright, this happened. There is milk on the floor. Something got thrown where we can’t get it.” Just describing it lends itself to think of solutions and put it in perspective. Sometimes just saying, “The toy was thrown and is behind the couch” causes the child to go “Oh!” and they go and get the toy. And one thing to remember: It is always OK to just shut yourself in a room for a few minutes, if the alternative of what you think you might do is worse.

So here I am describing all of the ways that a parent might be so angry as to lead to aggression (Parents need to mind the “No Hitting” rule too), now we may understand better what leads the child to be aggressive.

About 90% of the time that my son is aggressive on purpose, it is because he is protecting his stuff from his sister grabbing them. There is a lot that can be done to prevent this. In Montessori, each child has their own mat. It is expected that each child is allowed to work at their mat, without any other child taking their stuff. In a home setting, things are different. My son is 3 and my daughter is just 1 years old. My daughter is very curious about her older brother, and, like any baby, crawls all over him and me to see things. This annoys my son. I do think that **Babies Need Their Own Area**. This is advocated in *Your Self Confident Baby* by Magda Gerber. For the most part, my daughter had a sectioned off part of a room that she stayed in, such that she was protected from her brother. This is also advocated in *Help Your Preschooler Build a Better Brain*. It is this time out of respect for the Preschooler: So they can do all of those brain building activities in peace.

If things get out of line, *you have to physically separate children*. Immediately. You have to get in and intervene. No talking, no lectures.

If my son is hitting with a toy, I take it immediately—no warnings. I have explained already that hitting is not tolerated. This is a **Toy Timeout**. I take the toy, put it up high, and I tell him “We’ll try again later.” The phrase “Try Again Later” is described as “Magic” in Positive Discipline books. It says to the child, “I know you made a mistake. But I trust you can behave better in the future.” I give the toy back in a matter of minutes, usually after my son says, “Mommy, I’d like to try again!” And he usually does stop hitting. Can I just say about Positive Discipline: The message gets through; The message gets through; The message gets through. And it usually gets through wordlessly.

The worst thing that ever happened, so far, between my two children, was a total accident. We were packing to go to the beach. In typical parent fashion, I thought my husband had watch over the kids, and he thought I had watch over the kids. I went to go to the bathroom (everything bad that happens, happens when mom is in the bathroom), while my husband was upstairs. In that time, my son pushed my daughter, who was in her car seat, off of a table, and she slammed onto the floor. The screams! It was terrible. My son instantly was in hysterics. My husband stormed down. The situation was terrible. Being in the bathroom and unable to react right away actually gave me time to think. And I did what I knew I had to do: I scooped my son up and took him to a different room. This can be considered a **Positive Timeout**, which is a “Time Out” as it was originally meant to be: A cooling off period after intense, confusing activity. I rocked with him and tried to calm him down, but nothing worked. Through sobs, I think he was trying to tell me that he was trying to get her in the car so we could go. I told him I understood it was an accident, but she was still hurt and we needed to apologize. He didn’t want to, so I did. Later, he apologized to her, on his own initiative! One way or the other, no further damage was done, things returned to a state of calm, and many lessons were learned.

This is a general sequence of events to consider executing after a child is aggressive or someone gets hurt:

1. Physically stop the aggression immediately.
2. Take a timeout. You the person reading this now has this as one of your first and primary responsibilities as peace keeper in your house. If you get one thing out of this article, let this be it.
3. Let the offending child air their grievances or explain themselves. No lectures are effective until they feel heard.
4. Explain how they hurt the other person. Ask them to apologize.
5. Remind them of the rule and work on showing a child a better way of handling the problem next time.

It is so hard to do all of those above steps. Committed moms are mothers, maids, and teachers to their kids, and you can also add security guard to their list of duties. It can be overwhelming. Dividing up some of these obligations is sure to help.

Now combine some of these problems, and you may appreciate more the very advanced skill set required to be an effective parent. Maybe you need your child to clean up, because everything is a mess and you are under pressure because you have a big event coming up, but they are instead hitting and throwing things. This is my emotion inside in this situation: “Grrrr!!” All I can ask you is to **Dig Deep**. In moments like this, I often have flashbacks to my youth and how I may have been handled. It is a natural reaction to want to send the child away or, worse, tell them they are terrible. What does this do though? It makes the child feel bad about themselves, like they are unworthy, and they are likely to shut down. Think of these tactics offered to you. Block the child from hitting, stop them from throwing, break things down for them into their most simple components, give a strong explanation, take a timeout, do whatever you have to. I have seen many times: One of these tactics usually does work.

Post Problem Clean Up

When the child goes through something traumatic or things get out of hand, some clean up is necessary.

An obvious one is **Apologizing**. If someone gets hurt, someone is owed an apology. I don't believe in forcing my child to apologize, though I may ask very strongly that they do it. I discuss the situation with them and then tell them the other person was hurt and needs apologized to. If they don't want to, then I do. I role model it for them. And if the other person was hurt, it *is* partially my fault. A parent's job is to keep everyone safe. If someone was hit, that is on me, and I give a genuine apology. If my son hurts another child who is not mine, in addition to explaining to my son what went wrong and what could go better in the future, I give the child an apology.

If the child experiences something traumatic, **Storytelling** can help. With storytelling, you retell the story, going slowly, skipping over the really bad parts until the child is ready, so they can put the event into perspective. One time we went to a Haunted House with my then 3 year old. I had thought there would be noodles as “brains” and such, but it actually was actors jumping out at patrons. I should have turned around and walked out, but I didn't, instead looking the actors in the eye and asking them not to jump at my son—all obliged. My son never cried during this but after he surprised me by asking to talk about what we just did. He was asking me to story tell!

What Never To Do

Here are some things that you should never do. These things escalate tension, anger, and, even if delayed, are responsible for much fighting.

Never Insult your child. Some people still seem to believe that insulting their child is “honest” and a necessary part of growth. In the words of Dr. Ginott, “Children hate to be evaluated.” Instead of insulting your child, see the section above on being their **Coach**. They have a weakness. Ok, we’ve been honest enough to see it. Now they need someone to show them how to develop the skill they are lacking. Break the skill set up into its component parts, find what level your child is at, and start working with them at that level, building to higher and higher levels as they gain practice and confidence. Commandments and insults don’t correct behavior; repetitive practice and actual accomplishments do.

I watched a special on a failing school once. A 9th grader failed the 9th grade and was put in remedial reading. He refused to go to class and had to be harassed by the principal and security officer to go to class every day. How painfully embarrassing it must be for the student to know full well he is in a “remedial” class.

As a different solution to this same problem, the author of *The Book Whisperer*, a teacher, describes how there are certainly students at different reading levels in her class, but for those at the lower end, they are simply given books of their interest at a lower level such that they read them with enthusiasm, building their skill set by practicing reading. What a much more positive way to deal with this, than any humiliation, intentional or not. The teacher’s students all, yes *all*, do extraordinarily well on standardized reading tests, year after year, and they *all* much exceed her challenge to them to read 40 or more books per year. Children have good things in them, both realized already and potential. Look for it, find it, let it soar!

Never Label your child. This is sometimes called giving your child a “Role.” A Label is an insult but with the added insult at the end, “and you were born that way, you’ll never change.” Giving your child an insulting nickname is an example. All I will say is look up fixed mindset versus growth mindset.

Finally **Never Compare** your child to other children. This one is terribly painful. It goes like this, “Your brother gets good grades, why can’t you?” Or “Your sister is so outgoing. But you’re just a dork.” To see more on this, see the book *Siblings Without Rivalry*.

Chart

Here is an overview of what was just described. A lot of detail is still missing from it. After reading this article though, I hope it gives a general overview. Simply reviewing it, occasionally, helps to re-center and remind me of what to do as a parent.

Thoughts? Send them my way: amp237@hotmail.com.

Flow Chart of Positive Discipline Tactics

