



# Grandparents *Raising* Grandchildren

  
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

## Disciplining Your Grandchildren

***How do you teach children to behave appropriately, even when you're not around?***

The key is effective, consistent discipline. Children are most likely to be well-adjusted when you combine warmth and love with clear rules and consistency. Children need to understand that you love and care for them. But they also need to know that there are rules they must follow and consequences for breaking those rules. Effective discipline requires lots of patience and understanding.

### Rules for Making Rules

Children find comfort in rules because they know what to expect and how to behave. Some children misbehave simply to force you to set limits on their behavior. It's your responsibility to set clear, age-appropriate rules for your grandchildren. The following guidelines may help you decide on good rules.

- **Rules should be necessary.** Don't overburden children with too many rules, or they won't remember them. Pick a few simple rules that cover most behavior, and make sure the rules are important. Setting rules that behavior cannot hurt yourself, others, or property should cover most situations for young children.
- **Rules should be realistic.** Children need to be able to follow your rules. Make sure the behaviors you expect are things your grandchildren can reasonably do. Expecting a two-year-old to sit quietly through a 2-hour movie is not reasonable. As children grow, rules should be adjusted to reflect their new levels of maturity. As children get older, involve them in deciding on family rules. Children



are much more likely to follow a rule if they helped make it.

- **Rules should include a positive statement.** Even when children want to follow the rules, they may not know what behavior is appropriate. Tell your grandchildren what you want them to do. For example, you might say, "please walk when you are inside" instead of just "don't run."
- **Rules should have reasons.** As children get older, they may start to question your rules. Help them understand that rules exist to keep them safe and help them get along with others. Your reason for a rule shouldn't be just, "because I said so!" Telling children why certain rules exist helps them learn to think for themselves. Children are also more likely to follow rules if they understand the reasons behind them. You might explain that they need to be in bed by 8:00 on school nights because

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Children feel more secure when they know what is expected of them.

Make a few clear rules for children's behavior, and enforce them every time they are broken.



getting enough sleep helps them be healthy and ready to learn.

- **Rules should be enforced consistently.** Children need to know that there are consequences for breaking rules. Every time a child breaks a rule, you need to calmly enforce that rule. This is especially important when grandchildren first come to stay with you. When children first come into your home, you might think you're doing them a favor by being lenient about misbehavior. But letting children break the rules in the beginning will just lead to more misbehavior later. When children don't have rules, they believe that no one cares about what they do. Enforcing the rules helps them know you are concerned and reliable.



### When Children Misbehave

Your goal is to help children become responsible for their own behavior, to learn

right from wrong, and to behave appropriately. When children break the rules, there are several good strategies and “tools” for handling misbehavior. Here are some basic guidelines for disciplining children:

- **Understand why children misbehave.** Some children act up to get your attention. Others are trying to get control of a situation, or are feeling stressed or tired. When a grandchild misbehaves, pay attention to the whole situation. What's going on that might have caused the problem? Why is she acting this way? If the child is old enough, you might ask her to explain why she acted a certain way.
- **Be both firm and kind.** Some adults mistakenly believe that they have to be mean when they discipline children. Children actually respond better when you are calm and kind. Speak calmly, but insist that they follow the rules.

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Children who have been through family stresses sometimes have lower self-esteem.

Avoid telling her that she's a bad person; this may only lower her opinion of herself. Let her know you still love her even when she misbehaves.

- **Don't try to be too nice.** Over-protecting or pitying your grandchildren doesn't make it any easier for them to adjust to living with you. Being too lenient only stops them from learning how to behave appropriately. It's good to empathize with children's feelings, but don't let them get away with misbehaving just because they're under stress. Gently teach them how to behave in the best way possible under tough circumstances.
- **Be consistent.** If you say you're going to do something, follow through. If you've told your grandchildren that they can't watch TV until her homework is done, keep the television turned off until the homework is completed. Don't give in to whining or pleading. When you don't follow through, children learn that you're not serious about the rules.
- **Criticize the action, not the child.** If your grandchildren break something, let them know that running in the house is a bad idea. Avoid telling them that they are bad; this may only lower their opinion of themselves. Let them know you still love them even when they misbehave. Emphasize that you expect good behavior because you love them.
- **Don't give in to embarrassment.** Sometimes children misbehave in public situations. A child throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of the grocery store can be quite embarrassing. But don't give in just to quiet him down. If your grandchild is throwing a fit because you won't buy him a candy bar, take him out of the store. Be proud that you made the right decision and didn't give in to the child for fear of public embarrassment.





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Temper tantrums and whining are examples of behaviors that are best handled by ignoring them.

- **Know who owns the problem.** Some problems are your grandchildren's responsibility, and only they can solve them. Teach your grandchildren that they are responsible for their own behavior. If your grandchild forgets her lunch, this is her problem. Help her learn ways to remember her lunch in the morning, but don't always go to her rescue by bringing the lunch to school.
- **Refuse to fight or give in.** If your grandchild doesn't get to play video games because he didn't do his chores, he may try to plead or argue with you. Once you have set a rule and a consequence, resist the temptation to give in when your grandchildren argue. Children will naturally test the limits you set. Your role is to make the rules clear and to enforce them consistently. Don't argue the point; simply restate the rule and the consequence. You

might say, "When you finish cleaning your room, you may watch television."

### Tools for Handling Misbehavior

No matter how clearly you state the rules, children will sometimes break them. When your grandchildren misbehave, try some of the following tools:

- **Ignoring.** Some misbehavior is meant to get your attention. If you ignore the behavior, children will eventually realize that there are other ways to get your attention. Temper tantrums and whining are examples of behaviors that are best handled by ignoring them. You can reinforce the message of ignoring by telling children that you will talk to them when they calm down or stop whining. But don't ignore any misbehavior that could be dangerous!
- **Redirecting.** When children are misbehaving, you can sometimes redirect their behavior to a more appropriate activity. If children are climbing on chairs and tables, take them outside to climb on the monkey bars. If a child is about to take a toy away from a sibling, give the child a different toy. Simple redirecting heads off many problems with very little stress.
- **Giving choices.** Sometimes children misbehave because they want to be in control. Help children feel some control by letting them make choices. A very young child can choose which shirt he wants to wear. Older children can make more complex choices. Be sure to limit the options to just a few.



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Having too many choices can overwhelm children. Be sure all choices are equally acceptable to you. If it's bedtime, don't offer children a choice of whether or not to go to bed. Instead, let them decide whether to brush their teeth first or read a story first.

- **Using “cool-down” time.** When children become angry or frustrated, they may not be able to solve the problem right away. If children are upset, teach them how to take time to calm down before they handle the problem. Treat this as a time to collect themselves, not a punishment for misbehaving. Encourage them to find a quiet spot. Have them take a few deep breaths. Give them a quiet activity to work on for a few minutes. When they are calmer, help them find a positive way to solve the problem.

- **Using consequences.** Consequences are what happen to children as a direct result of breaking a rule. To be effective, consequences need to be immediate and clearly related to the misbehavior. Some consequences happen without your help. When children leave the caps off the magic markers, the markers will dry out. Other consequences have to be enforced by adults. If a child writes on the walls, she should be expected to clean them. If a child throws a toy, she might not be allowed to play with that toy any more. Remember that you need to use consequences right after children misbehave. Punishing children weeks later isn't effective because they don't connect the punishment with the behavior.



Children will naturally test the limits you set. Your role is to make the rules clear and to enforce them consistently.

Keep in mind that every child is unique. Tools and strategies that work for one child may not be effective with another child. Different tools may work better in different situations. Pay attention to your grandchildren's personalities, and choose discipline strategies that work well for them. It's often a process of trial and error!

### Teaching Appropriate Behavior

Discipline is not just about stopping your grandchildren from misbehaving. To be effective, discipline needs to teach children the right ways to behave. Here are a few ways that you can help children learn appropriate behavior.

- **Send clear messages.** Some children's misbehavior is funny. But laughing when a child misbehaves may give him the attention he is seeking, and may encourage him to misbehave again later. When a child says something that is rude but funny, make it obvious that,



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no matter how funny the behavior may seem, it is not appropriate. Avoid telling “cute” stories of children’s misbehavior when they are listening; this may also encourage the misbehavior.

emphasis off the misbehavior. Using I-messages also helps children connect their actions with your feelings, which helps them empathize with others.

**Giving clear positive messages and complimenting good behavior teaches them how to manage their own behavior both at home and when you’re not around.**

■ **Give positive instructions.** Whenever possible, tell your grandchildren what they *can* do instead of what they can’t do. When children ask to do something fun but have not finished the chores, you might tell them, “Yes, as soon as you’ve cleaned up your room,” instead of “Not until you...” Emphasize the rule “Walk when you’re in the house” instead of “Don’t run in the house.” Stating instructions positively helps children learn how they are supposed to behave.

■ **Use “I-messages.”** When confronting children about misbehavior, tell them how you feel. You might say, “I feel unsafe and scared when the door is unlocked because I’m afraid someone might steal our things. Please lock the door when you come inside.” When you use an I-message, you may help defuse the situation by taking the

■ **Catch children being good.** When your grandchildren do things you’re proud of or behave appropriately, compliment them. Make an effort to tell children why you are pleased with their behavior. Be specific about what they have done to please you. Emphasize the behavior, not the child. Saying “Thank you for cleaning up your room without being asked” is more effective than saying “You’re such a good girl!”

### In Summary

Disciplining your grandchildren is an ongoing process. Setting and enforcing a few clear rules helps them learn how to behave appropriately. Giving clear positive messages and complimenting good behavior teaches them how to manage their own behavior both at home and when you’re not around.





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Developed and released by Dr. Diane Bales, Human Development Specialist, Cooperative Extension, The University of Georgia. The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren series was adapted, with permission, from the Grandparents as Parents series originally developed by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension and released by Sam Quick. For more information, go to <http://www.gafamilies.org> or call 1-800-ASK-UGA1.



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Publication # CHFD-E 59-14

revised July, 2009