

This article is part of an ongoing series of health and wellness articles for Ft. Carson Tricare beneficiaries. Dr. Patrin invites you to submit medical topics and health care questions to be addressed in future issues.



Let's Talk About ...

PARENTING DISCIPLINE SKILLS

This week's article is the first in a series on basic parenting skills. Look for more in future issues!

Raising a child in the best way possible is a very tough job. I know of no one who can do his or her best without outside assistance. Assistance is helpful, not only for babysitting, so you can get a break (we all need those), but also for advise concerning the best discipline methods to use. After all, we all hope to raise a child who is respectful and contributing to society in a positive way. We've all seen, or heard of, the problem daycares have with unruly toddlers, teachers have with disrespectful students, and parents have with disruptive children. The best way to avoid having a child fall in the wrong category is to gather information before your child begins 'misbehaving'!

I advise a couple to attend some form of parenting discussion or seminar before the child is 15 months old, if possible. Relying on friends and relatives for advice is fraught with inaccuracies, as they have likely been raised by folks with the same misconceptions many of us share. The most common mistake parents make early on is to discipline their child for what is seen as disrespectful behavior, when what is actually happening is the child is exploring his or her environment in a healthy way, testing the limits of what is acceptable and what is not. If it's within a two-year-olds grasp, it should be fair game! The one who has actually 'misbehaved' is the person who left the item out for them to play with! A toddler cannot truly grasp the concept of sharing and patience until at least 3 years of age. Until then, we need to be careful to set up their environment for positive interactions and healthy exploration.

We all need to watch out for how often we say "no" to developing children. It becomes a fun game. We say, "No, no", with a lilt in our voice and a smile, as the baby accidentally pulls our hair, because they 'don't mean it'. When the infant gets more purposeful (and accurate) with their grasp, pulling our hair for attention, we change to "No, NO!!". They smile back (we taught them this). Rather, we should tie our hair back before playing with our baby, or simply stop saying "No" and firmly but gently remove our hair from their grasp. The ACTION says "No".

If children can't get our attention with acceptable behaviors, things escalate to attention-getting pulling, shouting, and biting, which is when we resort (often) to spanking and raised voices ourselves. Unfortunately, ANY attention to behavior, even negative attention, is likely to reinforce a return to that behavior. Ignoring a behavior, if possible, is more likely to extinguish it. Make the environment 'child friendly' for exploration and learning, saying "Yes" to activities, and find them being good, giving them your time and encouragement at that time. In the end you'll find yourself disciplining the one with the misbehavior who set the toddler up for this negative situation (that's us again)!

When facing a situation where you feel an urge to stop, or change, a behavior (i.e. pay attention to the person in a negative way) ask yourself three basic questions;

1. Is this behavior developmentally normal for this age?
(Probably so. If you're not sure, consult with your medical provider.)

2. If it's normal behavior for this age - do I really need to get involved?
(Yes, only if it's a health/safety or respect issue! If you can ignore it, do so, and avoid accidentally reinforcing it!)
3. If I do need to get involved, ask, "Who has the problem? Who 'misbehaved'?"
(Usually, it's us, by not preparing the environment or child. So, DISCIPLINE THE ONE WHO MISBEHAVED. Change the environment, or learn not to be annoyed by the behavior! TIME OUT YOURSELF!!!!)

Try the question routine above and you'll find yourself spending more time ignoring normal behavior, and rewarding good behavior. The 'tools of the trade' are found in any good parenting skills-building class. Check out ACS classes or inquire at your primary care clinic on opportunities available. More next time on the "Goals of Misbehavior"