



Mott Poll Report

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Naughty or Nice? Parent Views on Disciplining Young Children

Discipline helps young children learn what behaviors are safe and appropriate. This process starts at a young age, and parents can use different types of discipline. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 1-5 years old about their experience with discipline for young children.

Parents say they make decisions about what discipline strategies to use by discussing with their child's other parent (63%), talking with family and friends (36%), using outside sources (parenting books, articles, social media) (36%), discussing with a healthcare provider (17%), or using what worked with them (33%). Thirteen percent say they haven't thought about discipline strategies.

Parents report their discipline strategies include giving their child a warning (53% often, 42% sometimes), speaking firmly (49% often, 48% sometimes), redirecting to another activity (46% often, 49% sometimes), and putting the child in time out (13% often, 59% sometimes). Parents of children 1-2 years are more likely to redirect behavior, while parents of children 3-5 years are more likely to give warnings, speak firmly, and put their child in timeout.

Parents also report using discipline strategies not recommended by experts, such as bribing a misbehaving child (9% often, 59% sometimes) and spanking (3% often, 42% sometimes). Using threats is more common among parents of children 3-5 years than parents of children 1-2 years, such as threatening to leave an activity or place (80% vs 56%), threatening to take away toys/electronics (85% vs 49%) or dessert (51% vs 22%), or threatening that there will be no Santa or gifts (24% vs 7%).

Most parents believe their discipline strategies are effective (38% very effective, 57% somewhat effective), with only 5% indicating they are not effective at all. Most parents rate themselves as either very consistent (49%) or somewhat consistent (45%) in disciplining their child. Parents say it is difficult to be consistent because the child is too young to understand (49%), strategies don't always work (42%), parents don't want their child to have a tantrum in public (31%); or that parents get too irritated when their child misbehaves (25%), react before remembering their strategies (25%), or are too tired to be consistent (24%).

Difficulties with consistent discipline

% of parents of kids age 1-5 years noting difficulty

Child-related

- Too young to understand **49%**
- Strategies don't always work **42%**
- Don't want tantrum in public **31%**

Parent-related

- Get too irritated **25%**
- React before thinking **25%**
- Too tired to be consistent **24%**



Report Highlights

1 in 8 parents of young children have not thought about their discipline strategies.

Half of parents rate themselves as very consistent in disciplining their child.

1 in 4 parents have threatened their child age 3-5 years with no Santa or gifts.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in August 2024 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-17 years living in their household (n=2,010). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 67% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 725 parents with at least one child age 1-5. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 6 percentage points.

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Implications

Discipline plays a crucial role in helping children learn the difference between right and wrong, and in guiding them toward appropriate behavior. Disciplining young children can be challenging due to their changing needs as they move through developmental stages, the different situations and settings that call for discipline, and the day-to-day bustle of life with a young child.

Consistency is vital in any disciplinary approach. A key to consistency is for parents to be clear about what behaviors will be disciplined and what discipline strategies will be used. Most parents in this Mott Poll reported getting input about discipline strategies from several sources; however, 1 in 8 parents had not thought about discipline strategies. It is difficult to have a consistent approach to discipline without consideration and planning; even then, consistency can be difficult, especially when parents are tired, distracted, or feeling overwhelmed.

Discipline strategies should be appropriate for the child's age and developmental level. At age 1 year, children are exploring their environment and willful misbehavior is rare. Distraction and redirection are often effective for keeping the child safe and establishing positive habits. At age 2 years, children understand their actions can cause a reaction from others, and they frequently test that out. It can be particularly challenging for parents to decide what behaviors should be disciplined vs ignored. Speaking firmly can be helpful to stress important behaviors, such as those related to safety.

At 3-5 years, children increasingly understand cause and effect, so discipline strategies should emphasize logical consequences to misbehavior. For instance, if a child spills a drink out of anger, an appropriate punishment would be to have them clean up the mess; an unrelated or delayed punishment will be less effective. Consequences should also be immediate, so the child understands the connection with their misbehavior.

Some parents in this Mott Poll reported using discipline strategies that experts do not recommend. This includes making threats to leave an activity, take away the child's toys, or tell Santa not to come. All too often, parents do not follow through on these threats, and children soon learn to ignore their parent's attempts at discipline. Immediate consequences linked to the misbehavior, rather than empty threats, will boost parent credibility while helping children learn.

Parents of young children are often tempted to bribe their misbehaving child with the hope of avoiding a tantrum in public. Certainly, this situation can be embarrassing, but giving in to the child's misbehavior will have a negative impact – the child learns to throw a tantrum to get what they want. Although some bystanders may give a disapproving glare, many will remember their own battles with toddlers and offer understanding, if not outright support.

While physical punishments, such as spanking, may appear to work in the short term, the evidence suggests that they are less effective in the long term and are more likely to lead to defiance. Furthermore, physical punishment in early childhood has been linked to increased aggression in preschoolers and school aged children. Instead, appropriate use of a time out period can help stop children from engaging in undesirable behaviors and provide an opportunity for them to control their emotions.

Finally, flexibility is key in discipline, as both parents and children will make mistakes and learn from them. Each child is unique and may respond differently to various techniques. As children grow, their responses to discipline will change, so parents must adapt their strategies. Balancing correction with positive reinforcement—like praise and rewards—helps children build self-esteem while learning from their mistakes. By staying open to new approaches and modeling healthy responses, parents can create a positive family dynamic.