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Foreword

As an educational psychologist who works with young children and the mother of a 5-year-old, supporting children's development and well-being is both my passion and my profession. *Toddler Discipline for Every Age and Stage* addresses so much of what I have learned and practiced over the years. It is a clear and organized guide that you'll take down from the shelf often as a reference and reminder, both when you are looking forward to the next milestone and when things aren't going according to plan.

One of my favorite things about this book is Aubrey's reminder that the first step in disciplining our children is to ask ourselves whether our child's action (e.g., eating with her fingers) is actually a problem. This book tells us to focus on priorities and on what *is* under our control (guidance I would do well to heed at the dinner table).

My son is a talker; he takes part in discussions of concepts beyond his years. Given his language skills, it has always been easy to assume that just because he can talk about what we're asking of him, he can *do* it; so when he struggles with coordination, it can lead to frustration for him and us. Aubrey's elegant presentation of what to expect from children at each stage, coupled with reminders that every child's development follows its own trajectory, helps us

meet our children where they are. For now, I can rest easy knowing someday my kid will eat his noodles with utensils.

In reading this book, you will discover joy in connecting your child's needs, interests, and preferences to his behaviors and learn to look through the lens of his developmental tasks at each stage. You will gain insights into how to shape your home environment to best support your child's needs, explore ways to help your child manage her emotions, and learn strategies to say "Yes" as often as possible.

As Aubrey so keenly states, parenting is the ultimate opportunity to grow as a human being. I encourage you to embrace the guidance given in this book; it will support you in forming and maintaining a cooperative relationship with your child, and in having fun along the way!

—*Breana Sylvester, PhD*

Founder, Growing Curiosity Early Learning

Introduction

He glares at me from across the kitchen, eyes squinting in fury, face reddening as he holds his breath. Headfirst and full force, he runs toward my belly, and upon contact, mashes himself against me. His arms are flailing, and I can't tell if he's actively trying to hit me or if he's just out of control. My biceps are still stronger than his so I use them to hold him at bay without hurting him. He screeches in protest and reaches for my waist. I can see tears forming in the corners of his eyes. I feel awful inside.

In my head, I am running through all the discipline strategies I know and I'm second-guessing all of my decisions. Did I make the wrong choice by setting a limit? Was I too harsh or unsympathetic? Am I a pushover? And the worst thought of all—am I failing as a parent?

I give up fighting him. Heart pounding, I reverse the energy flow and hug him tightly instead. I yell, "You're mad at me! You're really, really mad! I'm sorry we're fighting. I don't want to fight. I love you. I love you so much!" His body goes rag-doll limp. He takes a shaky breath and lets out a sob. We melt to the floor together, a tangle of bent knees and bowed heads. I still don't know if the way I handled the situation would seem right or wrong in anyone else's eyes, but my own uniquely impulsive and intensely emotional child accepts

the cuddle. I rock us back and forth for a long time, whispering, “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Every time we interact with our children, we have the opportunity to coach them on how to manage their own emotions and behave appropriately in social situations. It isn’t easy; our own personalities and insecurities greatly influence how we address a challenging behavior in our children.

As the daughter of a Montessori preschool teacher and a psychologist, child development was a frequent dinner table topic. By the time I was 13, I was completely hooked. My childhood heroes were Alfie Kohn and Madelyn Swift, two fierce proponents of a more positive, compassionate approach to discipline. I also became aware that I was being raised differently from many of my peers: While my friends and cousins were spanked or grounded, I was counseled. But it wasn’t exactly easy to come clean, reveal my emotions, and mutually agree upon solutions, so sometimes being punished seemed like the easy way out! Still, I grew up with a heavy appreciation of the time my parents spent with me to offer their guidance, and the fair and respectful treatment of children became the golden, wrapped-up package in my soul.

After several years of teaching kindergarteners and a whole lot more personal research on disciplinary techniques and strategies to handle defiance, effective parenting seemed so *easy*. When I saw a child having a tantrum in the grocery store, I assumed that if the parent had been proactive in the right way, the whole embarrassing conflict could have been avoided. In the words of Bob Dylan, “Ah, but I was so much older then. I’m younger than that, now.”

The first time I had to handle a tantrum from my own child, I was knocked flat off my feet! All the strategies I had learned by heart now had to be implemented in practice, not just preached. The complete lack of objectivity had rendered me a newbie in the field. What I had learned to be true from the books now had to be learned all over again from experience. And so, my children set about teaching me the right way to parent them.

Now, as a parent coach and educational consultant, I listen to the concerns and anxieties of many parents in the thick of those tough toddler years, and my heart aches in remembrance. Parenting is a humbling experience. Children pass through such a quickly progressing succession of developmental stages during the first few years of life that it's hard for us to keep up with their current needs, much less anticipate what changes will occur next. As my mama always said with a bit of cheekiness, "If you don't like your child's behavior, just wait a few weeks for a new developmental stage. By then, you'll have an entirely different problem to figure out!"

In addition, most of us have no real memories of what it felt like to be a toddler. We can only imagine the intensity of their emotions as they push toward independence and simultaneously demand the safety and comfort that can only be provided by a parent.

You, like your child, are on a path of *becoming*. Your quest: to nurture your child's potential, and while doing so, learn how to become a stronger and more compassionate human being yourself. Every day, you bravely face the possibility of tantrums and acts of defiance, obstacles that would ruffle even the most heroic among us. Yet you are never alone in these woods.

Unlike in a fairy tale, there is no magic wand or spell that can skip you to the happily-ever-after; however, what I can offer you is a map that reveals your child's natural developmental path. I can also help fill the backpack for this journey with discipline strategies to pick and choose from as you learn what works best for you and your child. I can give you a heads-up about the issues parents commonly face during each year so that you know what to look for. And I can reassure you that there is no such thing as perfection. We all make mistakes and learn from them. Our children's capacity for forgiveness and acceptance of our faults is unfathomable. As long as you are meeting your child's basic needs for health, safety, and love, you will walk right out of these dark woods into the sunlight. I promise.



CHAPTER
ONE

Discipline and Your Toddler

No doubt, you would like to have a well-behaved child. You may even be feeling pressure from family members, friends, and strangers you meet on the street to make sure your mini-me stays polite and quiet. Here's the good news: You can have a well-behaved child. The bad news: You can't have one all of the time. By the very nature of human brain development, our children require time, patience, and guidance to learn how to treat others with respect and regulate their own emotional states.

What Is Discipline?

How do you make a child behave? The answer may be shocking: you don't. He alone is able to choose to modify his behavior within the scope of his current developmental capabilities. But you have a lot of power as his parent. You can help him make the choice to comply or cooperate with your requests, and you can teach him about the

behavioral expectations for different situations in your culture. He needs *discipline*. To use the transitive verb to bring home the point, he needs *to be disciplined* by you.

Parenting experts still debate about what effective discipline for young children looks like, and there are many techniques you can try. Punishment may immediately come to mind, but routine spanking or smacking, isolating, or taking away possessions, privileges, or experiences from a child can have unintended consequences later on in life. When you use punishment as a discipline technique, you are sending your child the message that you want him to suffer for his actions. In his subconscious, he is making the connection that your love is equal to your approval.

As the parent enforcing a rule with punishment, you may see yourself as “taking charge” or “laying down the law.” What you might not see is that underneath his compliance, he is choosing to change his behavior because he is afraid of being hurt or abandoned. Many adults who were punished severely as children struggle with higher levels of stress that can lead to excessive guilt, anxiety, or depression. Others struggle to maintain healthy, trusting relationships with others. In contrast, the reasonable use of consequences, which may involve removing your child from an unsafe or problematic situation, does not have the same impact. Setting limits on unsafe or inappropriate behavior leads to positive results. See page 91 for a fuller explanation of consequences and how to use them in a nonpunitive way.

Quick Tip: It can be emotionally difficult for us to disagree with the way our own parents raised us. Rejecting the use of a discipline technique does not devalue the worth of a relationship or negate the positive contributions of a person. Since your parenting journey involves a good bit of self-reflection, I invite you to acknowledge any uncomfortable feelings and keep an open mind as you read the suggestions provided here.

When looking for positive alternatives to punishment, parents often turn to using rewards and praise to encourage respectful behavior. Proponents of this technique suggest handing out stickers, candy, and other special treats in exchange for compliance. Evaluative praise such as “I like the way you’re sitting” or “Terrific job!” does provide positive reinforcement, but if praise is overused, the technique becomes emotionally manipulative. When the bribe or promise of your approval is no longer enticing enough to counter the potential thrill of breaking a rule, your children may one day intentionally choose not to receive it. This doesn’t seem like a big deal when the disobedience is minor, such as when an older child refuses to turn off the TV at bedtime. It becomes a really big deal when the rule-breaking is harmful to oneself, others, or the environment, like drunk driving.

A better approach to disciplining your child is to use techniques that foster his ability to make moral judgments about right and wrong for himself. This does not mean letting him do whatever he wants. While he is a toddler, you are the one responsible for making any major decisions that you feel are in his best interest.

Since a toddler lacks the cognitive ability to use reason or logic to solve problems or decide what behavior is appropriate in any given situation, you will be coaching him step-by-step. His budding independence will emerge by making simple, meaningful choices at first. When he releases his big emotions and loses control, you will offer your support by empathizing and giving him the boundaries he needs in order to feel safe and loved.

Setting Realistic Goals

Parents often have expectations for behavior that aren't realistic given the ages of their children. To help you put things into perspective, each chapter of this book contains developmental information with suggestions for realistic behavioral expectations for each age and stage. This will help you know whether the technique you are choosing will support your short- or long-term goals for your child's growth and development.

Short-Term Goals

There will be times when you need to set a limit and either commit to enforcing it quickly or let go of your ideal routine. Here are few examples of some common short-term goals related to behavioral issues.

- Compliance for the sake of safety: see page 26, Distract and Redirect
- Getting a good night's sleep: see page 33, Bedtime Struggles
- Using good manners: see page 107, Going Out in Public
- Stopping the whining: see page 141, Putting an End to the Whining

Long-Term Goals

Recently, when I asked a group of parents to name the characteristics they hoped their children would embody someday in the future, nobody mentioned blind obedience. Instead, I received an inspiring list of lofty, optimistic long-term goals. These parents hoped their children would become adults who were happy, responsible, independent, compassionate, honest, determined, curious, resilient, intrinsically motivated, and good problem-solvers.

Take a few minutes to make a list of your own. You might start by thinking about what you consider to be your own strengths and the experiences that helped you develop them. Also think about your family and community values. Which would you consider a high priority?

As you pick and choose from among the discipline techniques proposed in this book, think about whether they support the long-term goals you have identified as being important for your child's future. For example, when you offer your 2-year-old a simple choice, like wearing a red shirt or a blue shirt, this is a small, supportive act of discipline that not only helps you avoid a morning meltdown, but also cultivates independence and responsibility. When you sit down with your 4-year-old and have a heart-to-heart conversation about why excluding another person from a group activity is hurtful, you are teaching him about compassion.

Disciplining your often unreasonable, highly emotional toddler can be frustrating. To remind yourself of these long-term goals, you might even keep this list in a place where you will see it daily, such as on the refrigerator, in your purse, or by the front door.

Temperament and Behavior

Your parenting style will have a significant influence on how your child behaves and perceives her place in the world, but it is not the only factor by far. Many people assume that a child's personality is always the direct result of how permissive or dictatorial the parent is. This is a myth. Your child is a unique and valuable person, born with a predisposition toward certain traits that developed in utero and continued to be formed by her experiences throughout early childhood.

In a revolutionary 1970 study of infant reactions to stimuli, Alexander Thomas, Stella Chess, and Herbert G. Birch determined that a child's "personality is formed by the constant interplay of temperament and environment." The nine temperament traits identified in this study give us insight into why children raised in similar environments may behave differently from one another.

Activity level: This trait refers to your child's general energy level. A high-energy child can be a handful with all the squirming and wiggling, while a more sedentary child can be hard to motivate physically, as quiet, calm activities are preferred. If your toddler is constantly climbing the furniture, running in circles, and popping in and out of bed at night, provide ample access to the outdoors on a daily basis so that her muscles have the freedom to move. Indoors, focus on ways to safely meet her need to stretch and explore independently.

Rhythmicity: How predictable is your child's natural, biological rhythm? Some children will eat, sleep, and have bowel movements with extreme regularity. For them, a predictable schedule is a comfortable one and largely self-determined. Other children show much more irregularity, which can complicate meals, naps, and toilet learning. Parental intervention and flexibility are necessary to avoid conflict.

Distractibility: Is your child easily distracted by outside influences? A child with high distractibility will often be satisfied when you exchange an unsafe object for a safe toy or when you sing a song while performing an unappealing task, such as buckling a car seat or changing a diaper. A child who is less willing to be distracted will not stop fussing until the task has been completed.

Initial response: When confronted with a new situation, such as a new person, food, toy, or activity, how eagerly does your child embrace the new experience? Some children approach them with ease, immediately interacting and engaging impulsively. Others are slow to warm up, taking time to get comfortable and assess the situation. When you introduce your child to a new person, such as a babysitter, she may prefer to sit quietly in your lap observing for a while before interacting. However, the withdrawal of some children from new experiences is much more dramatic and requires considerable adult encouragement and patience. A child with a negative initial response to new situations will cry, hide, or run away. She will need emotional support and lots of time to adjust to new experiences.

Adaptability: This refers to your child's ability to adjust over time to new experiences, routines, or expectations. If your child is adaptable in temperament, transitioning from one activity to another will not be a big deal. Settling into a new schedule may take some time, but you will not typically encounter much resistance from your child. Other children will react adversely to new routines, as evidenced by tantrums, defiance, or anxious behaviors. These children will benefit from more gradual shifts in routine rather than dramatic ones.

Attention span and persistence: Does your child concentrate on a single activity for a long time? Does she continue to repeat and practice new skills despite any obstacles in her way? The child with higher levels of attention and persistence will not give up easily when asked to perform tasks that are initially frustrating. On the other hand, if you interrupt this same child to ask her to move on to another activity, you may be met with resistance and an inflexible attitude. If your child has a shorter attention span and less persistence, she may need a more step-by-step approach, reminders, and visual cues to help her complete difficult tasks.

Intensity of reaction: How strongly does your child show her emotions? Very intense children may be labeled as "overdramatic," celebrating with extreme exuberance when excited and sobbing or tantruming over minor disappointments. Children with lower levels of intensity may smile or cry, but in general their reaction to events will be much more subdued by comparison.

Parent to Parent: Loving Those Personality Differences

“My 3-year-old is very sensitive. He needs time to adjust to new situations and warm up to people, although he craves physical affection with us. He is also very caring, independent, logical, and clever. He is an outside-of-the-box thinker. I definitely need to empathize with him a lot and give him the space and time he needs to get used to a new place or new people. Everyone calls him shy, but he is just cautious. He also gets very frustrated pretty easily. He needs someone to be gentle with him and not dismiss his worries.

“I knew from the beginning that my second child was his opposite. My younger daughter is laid back and goes with the flow. She can handle a lot of things my son could not as an infant, such as missed or delayed naps, and she is more independent. I strive to follow peaceful and gentle parenting practices with both.”

— *Kate, 32, from Crown Point, Indiana, parent of two children (ages 3 years and 10 months)*

Sensory threshold: In response to varied physical sensations, does your child react positively, negatively, or not at all? Some children are sensitive and easily overwhelmed by sensory input, such as noise, light, or textures, which makes crowded, noisy places difficult to navigate. Others will react in the opposite way and will seek out more stimulation on purpose.

Quality of mood: Does your child tend to be cheerful and upbeat or have a distrustful and serious demeanor? Your child's moods will of course vary from day to day, but in general, most children lean toward a more positive emotional state or a more negative one.

Human personalities are uniquely different, but all are beautiful and complementary. No matter where a child falls on the spectrum of each of these temperamental traits, she deserves to be understood and valued for who she is and who she is becoming. Certain situations will be easier for her to deal with, and some discipline strategies will work better for her than others. By understanding the way she approaches life's experiences, you will be able to empathize with her struggles, choose the most effective parenting techniques, and lovingly guide her toward adulthood.

Age-Appropriate Discipline

Your child's general temperament may stay fairly constant from infancy, but the natural course of human development is not a steady path. As your child grows older, his needs, interests, and behaviors will shift, sometimes dramatically, and therefore your discipline strategies must also cater to his present self, not to the child he was before.

Using the “distract and redirect” technique is often very effective and easy to implement for a 1-year-old, even if your child’s temperament is fairly low in distractibility. However, a few years later, this same technique is not likely to go over well, as 4-year-olds have longer attention spans and a clearer understanding of how to follow rules. At age 3 and above, most children are able to make the connection between their actions and the natural consequences, but not before. Sparking the imagination is a technique that speaks especially to a 4-year-old’s proclivity for pretend play, while a 1-year-old would just be confused.

In this book, you will find suggestions for techniques that generally work well for children at specific ages, given their current developmental capabilities.

Choose Your Approach

If I had to honestly describe my general approach to disciplining my own children, it would be fairly well encapsulated in these three words: patient, empathetic, and silly. As a highly emotional optimist, I often start the mornings with my young children by singing a familiar upbeat song, followed by raspberry-belly-induced giggling, and then a gentle reminder about the day’s upcoming activities.

If one of my children begins to act out, I typically watch and wait first to see if my child will change his behavior on his own before I intervene, and I’m gifted at conveying my empathy. However, I do struggle with organization and routines. My spontaneous, impulsive personality can conflict with my children’s need for structure. I may personally lean toward being a bit too messy and goofy, but

I strongly identify with other parents who use a gentle or positive approach to discipline.

Now it's your turn to craft your own approach to discipline. Your personality and outlook on life will greatly influence how you communicate with your child. Do you tend to be quieter or more boisterous? Do you enjoy flexibility or are you more rigid by nature? What is your tolerance for frustration? Do you typically see the glass as half-full or half-empty? Your child's temperament and age will also influence what disciplinary techniques are most effective. Finally, think about the long-term goals you consider most important to help your child learn right now. With these personal preferences in mind and the wide variety of techniques explained throughout this book, you will be on your way to creating a consistent philosophy of your own.

How to Use This Book

This book has been designed as a practical guide to understanding and managing your toddler's behavior. To help you navigate the transitions both into and out of toddlerhood, I have included information for a 4-year age span.

Each age-specific chapter of this book contains the following:

- An overview of your child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development
- Effective and age-appropriate discipline techniques
- Common behavioral issues with suggested strategies for overcoming them

Throughout the book, you will find sidebars and boxes with tips for navigating tricky situations, reminders of how to best communicate with your child, and advice from parents who have been in similar situations.

Keep in mind that child development is not a linear process. Your child may reach milestones sooner or later than another child who is the same age. The developmental notes are generalizations for each age group.

The suggested disciplinary techniques in this book do build upon one another from year to year. Each chapter's selections are particularly relevant for that age, but if you gradually learn how to use each year's tools, you will have a plentiful supply to pick and choose from throughout your child's toddlerhood. This flexibility will allow you to curate your own approach to discipline based on the needs of your child.

Specific behaviors also vary greatly depending on your child's temperament and other environmental factors. Some topics, such as sleep or tantrums, may appear in several chapters with age-specific advice. For example, tantrums may simply not be an issue for you until your child is past the age of 2, whereas another child may have severe tantrums as a 1-year-old and none by age 3. When a topic is not covered in one age group, it's perfectly fine to skip around either before or after your child's biological age to find strategies for specific behavioral issues.

In-Depth Look: Be Your Own Sounding Board

Getting to the root of a challenging behavioral situation and deciding how to handle it requires objectivity—something of which all parents are in perpetual short supply! If you have a friend or willing partner to listen, that is a fantastic way to gain clarity. If not, you can be your own sounding board. Start by asking and answering these three big questions:

1. Can I allow my child's current behavior to continue?

Only you can decide if the answer to this question is *yes* or *no*, but before you use any disciplinary technique, you need to know why you are choosing to allow the behavior or why you must stop it. There is so much to be said for letting things go unless you are fully ready and willing to follow through. Many of the challenging behaviors we see in our children have developmental reasons or are a sign of your child's temperament. If the activity in question is a reasonable one for the age of your child and isn't doing any real harm to anyone or anything, consider letting it go or changing the situation slightly so that you can allow it.

- 2. Am I allowing for independence and providing security?** Many conflicts between adults and children occur because of the tension between the child's natural desire to acquire new skills, as modeled by the adults around him, and the desire for adult supervision and protection that will keep him safe as he explores. Effective parenting is never prescriptive. Like a scientist, before you come to a solution, you must observe, experiment, analyze, and then make changes if necessary.
- 3. Am I focused on building a relationship based on trust and respect?** Take a close look at how you are responding to your child's behavior. Are you committed to nurturing a healthy relationship between the two of you? Disciplinary strategies that are belittling, threatening, manipulative, deceiving, coercive, or sarcastic may gain your child's obedience, but they will not gain your child's cooperation. Trust is earned, not demanded.

What you are aiming for is authentic, gentle loving guidance with clear limits. Answering these three questions will get you closer to that ideal.