

# Parenting the Preschooler

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 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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## Responsive Discipline (Guidance Tools)

When preschoolers misbehave, guidance tools teach what you want them to learn and help foster responsibility and self-esteem. Try one or two to become comfortable, then move on to others.

**Explain limits.** When your child doesn't understand what you expect of him, tell him the reasons for your limits. If your child understands the reasons, he or she is more likely to follow the rules. *You tell your 4-year-old, "Play with the ball outside, not inside, because something might get broken."*

**Provide a reminder of the rule.** When your child forgets a rule, tell her the rule again as a positive reminder. Give the reminder once. Explain what will happen if the rule is not followed. *Say to a three year old: "Emily, the rule is to hold my hand in the store or you will need to ride in the stroller."*

**Provide a hearing.** When you are unsure about what happened and who was responsible for a problem, ask your child to describe it. Listen to him without criticizing or blaming. Then determine the extent of his responsibility for the problem. *Anna (three years old) takes a toy away from Billy (15 months). Mother who is in the next room hears Billy crying. She walks into the room and says to Anna, "What is making Billy cry?" Anna says, "I took Billy's toy away."*

**Affirm feelings and thoughts.** When your child is too emotional to think clearly, tell him the

feelings and ideas that are evident from his actions. Use a tone of voice that matches the intensity of your child's feelings and ideas, instead of telling him what he thinks and feels is wrong. Remember, affirmation doesn't mean you agree. *For example: "Ryan (a 4-year-old), I know you WANT something to drink RIGHT NOW, but we need to make some juice first."*

**Help with frustrating tasks.** When your child becomes frustrated to the point of losing control, help her just enough to solve the problem. Give some encouragement along with the help. *Susan (3-years-old) is becoming more and more frustrated as she tries to zip her jacket. Father praises her efforts and helps by holding the bottom of the jacket zipper so Susan can pull up the zipper.*

**Offer substitutes.** When your child is misbehaving with something, give him a similar, but more acceptable replacement. *Your 3-year-old is always taking your ballpoint pens out of the drawer to draw with. You give him his own washable markers and a pad of paper to use.*

**Say "NO!"** When your child isn't sure how serious you are about a rule, get her attention and give a calm but firm sign of your disapproval. Sometimes just giving "the look" will do. You see your preschooler take several cookies right before dinner, you get her attention, and give her "the look." She puts the cookies back.

**Stay relaxed.** When you feel over-whelmed by stress, take a moment to release physical tension, Take a deep breath and sigh, smile to yourself, and release your muscle tension as you breathe out. *Your preschooler has a temper tantrum in a crowded shopping mall. You feel yourself becoming more and more angry with your child's behavior. Before losing control, you sigh deeply, physically relax, and tell yourself, "She's tired. It's time to go home. Relax. It will be all right."*

**Ask for the rule to be restated.** If your child knows a rule and is acting on impulse, ask her to stop what she is doing and tell you the rule she's breaking. Tell her when she's right. *"Elizabeth, what's the rule?"... "No throwing balls in the house!"... "That's right."*

**Ask for consequences.** When your child doesn't seem concerned about the effect of her misbehavior, talk with her about how she and others have been affected by what she has done. *"Bridget, [a 4-year-old] you kept taking all the toys away when your friend Ashley came over to play. What happened because you did that?"... "She didn't want to play any more and we had to take her home." ... "That's right. When your friends come to play we need to share our toys with them or they will want to leave."*

**Make a polite request.** Ask your child to change a minor misbehavior. Be specific and concise. Tell him what you need and how you feel. If he refuses, ask him to tell you what you said from your point of view. *"Mike, I need to get the house cleaned for company tomorrow. It would help me if you color at the table instead of taking out your train set and blocks."*

**Ask for help to understand.** Ask your child to tell you what she thinks is the problem. If she realizes she's being taken seriously, she may calm down faster than if she is lectured. Talking about the problem may help children think of solutions.

*Your 4-year-old is coloring at the table and begins to cry. You don't know what is making her cry so you say, "What are you crying for? Tell me, so I can try to help." Your child says, "I can't find my blue marker."*

**Remove the child from situations he or she cannot handle.** Gently remove your child from a difficult situation where he is losing self-control. *Your older child and friend are playing a game of "Sorry." Your 3-year-old is trying to play, but is unable to understand all the rules, and becomes frustrated, You say, "Chris, let's play a game of Candyland."*

**Give permission.** When you are not successful at stopping a minor form of misbehavior, ask yourself if you're expecting too much. You may decide to back off and admit defeat before you make the problem worse. By giving permission you keep your influence for more important issues. *Father insists that Maria (4-years-old) wear a dress to the party. Maria gets dressed and puts on her favorite sweater and pants. Father and Maria argue about what she is wearing. Father realizes it isn't that important that she wear a dress and gives permission for Maria to decide what she will wear.*

**Use humor.** When a lighthearted approach might work, use humor to make a point or remind your child of what you expect of him. Avoid ridicule or sarcasm. *Mark has left his coloring books and crayons at the kitchen table. He was asked to pick them up so you could get supper on the table. Mark asks, "What's for supper?" You say, "Looks like we'll be eating crayons and coloring books tonight."*

**Emphasize positive thinking.** When your child feels discouraged, help her to see the problem in a more practical way. *You get your preschooler to clean up the toys in her room by making a game of the activity.*

Source:

Charles A. Smith, 1993. *Responsive Discipline, Effective Tools for Parents*, Cooperative Extension Service, Kansas State University.