



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime



TUNING IN  
NATIONAL PARENT SURVEY

# Takeaways for Parents

## Discipline Do's: An Empathic and Effective Approach to Addressing Challenging Behaviors in Young Children

*Tuning In*, ZERO TO THREE's national Parent Survey, confirmed that discipline is one of the toughest jobs for parents when it comes to raising young children. More than half of parents across all economic, gender and racial/ethnic segments say that "figuring out the most effective way to discipline" and "managing my child when he/she misbehaves" are among their biggest challenges when it comes to parenting a young child (57% and 56% respectively).

One major factor that makes it so difficult for parents is an overestimation of children's ability for self-control, such as being able to manage their emotions and to share, skills that don't start developing until 3 ½ to 4 years. The part of the brain that controls emotions are in the early stage of development in the first 3 years.

To guide you in establishing effective ways to handle typical challenging behaviors in the early years, here are 6 scenarios that offer some developmentally appropriate ideas for using an empathic, teaching approach to discipline in the early years.

Child's Behavior	Parent Self-Check	Validate Child's Feelings/Goal/Desire and Explain the Rule	Partner for Joint Problem-Solving (with children over 2 ½)
Refuses to stop doing something you've asked her to stop, such as throwing a ball in the house.	Acknowledge your child's desire to throw, and remember that she isn't doing it on purpose to drive you crazy.	"I know you love throwing the ball because it's so much fun. But there is no throwing a ball in the house. It can be dangerous. The ball could hit someone or break something."	Brainstorm other ways your child can play with the ball. If it's valid, use the child's idea. If not, offer your ideas. For example, she can go outside to play with the ball, or she can stay inside if she throws the ball in a basket but not at people.

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Child's Behavior	Parent Self-Check	Validate Child's Feelings/Goal/Desire and Explain the Rule	Partner for Joint Problem-Solving (with children over 2 1/2)
<p>Won't cooperate with a transition, such as to stop playing and get into the car seat to go to child care.</p>	<p>Recognize that transitions are hard for young children. They need time to adjust and empathy and support to cope.</p>	<p>"I know it's hard to stop playing, but the timer has gone off. That means it's time to get into the car to go to child care."</p>	<p>Offer choices, such as taking a book or a small toy to ease the transition.</p> <p>Be creative: "What car? This isn't a car—it's a spaceship and you are an astronaut. Hop in!"</p> <p>Engage your child's imagination and empower them as the helper: "Bear wants to go to school and needs a lap to sit on. Can you help?"</p>
<p>Demonstrates aggressive behavior like hitting, kicking or biting.</p>	<p>Remind yourself that it's not "personal" or "immoral"—it's immaturity. Young children are driven by their emotions and act on their feelings.</p>	<p>"I know you are mad that I took the iPad away, but hitting is not OK. I know you don't mean to be hurtful. You lose control when you're mad."</p>	<p>When your child is calm again, ask for his ideas about how he can calm himself and express his feelings in ways that are acceptable. Offer some ideas yourself, like taking deep breaths to calm down, stomping his feet to get the anger out, or using his words to express just how mad he is.</p>
<p>Tells a lie to try to get out of trouble, like saying she didn't take a cookie when you know she did.</p>	<p>Know that lying is a normal developmental phase. Young children don't fully appreciate the meaning or consequences of lying. Calling them out on it directly is not a useful approach and can lead to more lying.</p>	<p>Go straight to the issue to avoid getting into a power struggle about whether she "did it" or not: "You wanted a cookie. I get that, you love cookies. But the rule is that you need to ask me before taking sweets from the kitchen. I know it's hard when you want something you can't have. You can choose apple slices or yogurt." Using this approach sends an important message and sets a limit without shaming the child.</p>	<p>Let your child know that whenever she has a problem (like wanting a cookie), she can come to you for help to find an acceptable solution.</p>
<p>Talks back to you or says something that pushes your buttons: "You are a bad, mean mommy!"</p>	<p>Calm yourself with a deep breath, and recognize that young children will come to rely on any strategies that get a big reaction from you.</p>	<p>Calmly address the underlying issue. For example, "I know you are mad that I won't let you play with my jewelry. But my necklace is fragile and not a toy." Then move on matter-of-factly. Avoid reacting to the words/behavior that are designed to yank your chain.</p>	<p>Ask your child for her ideas for other ways she can dress up. Offer a choice of something more acceptable your child might play with, such as some pretend/plastic jewelry or other dress-up items.</p>

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Child's Behavior	Parent Self-Check	Validate Child's Feelings/Goal/Desire and Explain the Rule	Partner for Joint Problem-Solving (with children over 2 ½)
Yells or screams at you to do something, like demanding you make him a waffle.	Take deep calming breaths and remind yourself that young children are driven by their desires.	"I know you are hungry and want a waffle, but I can't help you when you are shouting at me. When you can ask me calmly, I am happy to help."	Acknowledge that he has strong feelings and desires, then explain that demanding people do things and shouting are not acceptable strategies. Talk about or model other ways to communicate his feelings that will make it more likely others will want to help him.
Melts down completely, for example when she is told it's time to leave grandma's house.	Remember that the toddler brain has very little ability to control strong emotions.	"I know how hard it is to say goodbye to grandma. You love her so much. But it's time to go. We will come back and visit again soon." Then stop talking—that's the hardest part! Too much language can be overwhelming to the child. She mostly just needs your soothing presence and to know you understand.	Problem-solving can only happen once the child is calm. Acknowledge your child's strong feelings and when she is calm, comment on what a great job she did calming herself down - no matter how long it took. Then work together on ways to manage when she has to part from a loved one, such as having a special "see-you-next-time" kiss, or maybe snap a photo to send to grandma's phone on the way home as a way to feel connected.

**We have expertise in child development.  
You are the expert on your child.  
We are in this together.**

More results from *Tuning In: National Parent Survey* can be found on [www.zerotothree.org/parent-survey](http://www.zerotothree.org/parent-survey). Learn more about how to support children's healthy development in the first year and beyond by visiting [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org) and [www.JoinVroom.org](http://www.JoinVroom.org) or by tweeting #ParentForward.

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