The Amazing Brain and Discipline:
Positive Parenting Builds Healthy Brains
By Linda Burgess Chamberlain, PhD, MPH
The word, DISCIPLINE, means "to teach or train."
Positive approaches to discipline work because you are teaching your child how you want her/him to behave. When children learn, they are building new connections in their brains. Children learn best through relationships that make them feel safe, secure, and nurtured. When you build a trusting, warm and supportive relationship with your child, you are also helping to build your child’s brain. Positive parenting helps your child’s brain to mature and to learn from you how to deal with stress in a healthy way. Positive discipline strategies can strengthen your relationship with your child. The building blocks for positive parenting and discipline are:

Building trust with your child
Being there, keeping your word

Showing respect
Listening, acknowledge their feelings

Teaching your child how to behave
Be patient, don’t lose your temper

The first step is to create a plan for how you want to discipline your child. Think about positive ways to encourage good behavior with your child such as praise, routines, problem-solving, and time-outs. Having a plan for how you want to discipline your child in different situations can prevent you from reacting in a way that you don’t want to under stress.

Without a plan, parents often repeat the discipline that they experienced as children. Ask yourself if there is anything about the discipline that you experienced as a child that you want to be different for your child.
We can promote healthy brain development and wanted behaviors by following these six basic steps for positive parenting and discipline.

Model Good Behavior

YOUR CHILD HAS SPECIAL BRAIN CELLS CALLED “MIRROR” NEURONS. Mirror neurons allow children to reflect what they see you doing in their brains so they can copy or imitate how you behave. Your child can actually feel or mirror the same emotions that you are feeling! The best way to teach children good behaviors is to model good behaviors. Sharing, being kind, being respectful, and giving praise are all ways to teach your children how you expect them to behave.
Matching Discipline to Your Child’s Development and Needs

EVERY CHILD’S BRAIN IS UNIQUE! There is no one-size fits all discipline strategy for children. Every parent needs a toolkit of effective discipline strategies that they can choose from based on their child’s needs and the situation.

Your child’s brain is being shaped by experience and environment—it is constantly changing and you will need to adapt your discipline toolkit to meet your child where he or she is at in their development.

A good example of matching discipline to your child’s development is using time-out. This strategy usually doesn’t work well with children less than 3 years old—this is the age when a child’s brain starts to be able to reason and understand what time-out means.

4 Basic Steps for Time Out

- Set rules for time-out ahead of time (where, how long, when you will use it); the time limit is usually one minute for each year of age.
- Choose a quiet location for time-out where you can see your child.
- Ask your child to think about what he or she did wrong and how they could do better next time.
- When the time that you have set for time-out is over, talk with your child about what behaviors would be acceptable.
Several positive strategies for effective discipline are shown in the toolkit to the right. Ask yourself how you can adapt and combine these strategies for your child. For example, selective ignoring can be combined with redirecting by ignoring a child’s whining because she is upset that she can’t watch television and then redirecting her attention to finishing a puzzle to distract her.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 years old or younger</td>
<td>Redirect, distract, surprise</td>
<td>Redirect child to focus on something else such as a new activity; remove or block access to problem (place gate on stairway)</td>
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<tr>
<td>All ages</td>
<td>Selective ignoring</td>
<td>Stop paying attention to the behavior you don’t want; encourage and reward the behavior you do want</td>
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<tr>
<td>All ages; should occur at the time the problem occurred for children less than 7 years old</td>
<td>Withholding privileges</td>
<td>Choose something that your child values but don’t withhold something that your child needs such as a meal</td>
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<tr>
<td>All ages</td>
<td>Catch your child doing something right!</td>
<td>Reinforce positive behaviors with praise and rewards</td>
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Don’t Use Physical Punishment

Children can’t listen or learn well when they feel scared, hurt, or angry. Physical punishment often has the opposite effect of what parents want. Instead of teaching children how to behave responsibly, physical punishment is more likely to increase problem behaviors including resistance, power struggles, anger and rebellion.

Physical punishment can interfere with healthy brain development. Children build and keep brain connections that are reinforced by experience. Physical punishment, pain, and fear can wire and shape a child’s brain in unhealthy ways that lead to unwanted behaviors. These problems include aggression, conduct problems, depression, and substance abuse. Children who are hit are more likely to hit their friends and siblings.

Parents often say that they used physical punishment as a last resort when “they lost it” and that they had regrets afterwards. When a parent gets angry, their child can feel or mirror that emotion and get angry too. When children get angry, they cannot use the upper area of the brain that helps them control emotions and impulses. When a child is angry, they also cannot use this part of the brain to learn right from wrong.
Be Consistent

CHILDREN’S DEVELOPING BRAINS LEARN THROUGH REPETITION—by repeating experiences and routines. It is important that you are consistent with discipline so that your child knows what to expect and what you expect from them. Being consistent does not mean being rigid. Adjust your discipline strategies as your child’s brain matures and different situations arise.

Setting up routines for activities that you do with your child such as getting up in the morning, going to the store, and getting ready for bed can help. Follow through with consequences that you have set ahead of time for unwanted behaviors. Remember to praise and reward good behaviors!
Talk About It!

TALK WITH YOUR CHILD SO NEXT TIME THEY GET IT RIGHT!
Talking with your child—is a brain builder. Use words that your child can understand to teach your child why a behavior was not acceptable. When your child is 3 years or older, you can discuss what went wrong and ask for suggestions about how he/she could do it differently next time.

Children need practice making choices and experiencing the natural consequences of their choices. Create safe opportunities for your child to practice making choices such as which book he wants to read or if she wants to take her bath before or after reading a story.

Mom, can we read together before bed?
Take Care of Yourself

PARENTING IS HARD WORK. To be a good parent, you also need to take care of yourself. Getting enough sleep, asking for help when you need it, and taking time out for yourself can help you to stay healthy. Taking a few deep breaths when you are feeling frustrated with your child’s behavior and giving yourself a time-out to call a friend can give you the time to think through the situation and decide what will be the most effective response.

Negative experiences that may have happened a long time ago can resurface when you are stressed, over-tired, and dealing with the many challenges that parents face. Being in an unhealthy relationship with a partner who is abusive and/or controlling, can interfere with how you want to parent your children.

If you feel that your parenting is being affected by experiences you had as a child or current problems that you are experiencing, talk to someone you trust and ask for help. Remember, when you learn new things and practice strategies such as positive discipline, you are changing your brain too!
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**The Institute for Safe Families** (ISF) is a Philadelphia non-profit organization, whose mission is to strengthen families to create healthy, nurturing environments that promote the positive development of children and prevent family violence before it happens. For over 20 years, ISF has been an incubator for new ideas, developed innovative programming, and convened forums for cross-systems dialogue and collaboration aimed at building greater capacity for more effective prevention and response to all forms of interpersonal violence. www.instituteforsafefamilies.org

**Multiplying Connections** of The Health Federation of Philadelphia is a cross system collaborative whose mission is to translate the research on early childhood brain development into better practice through professional training and organizational and policy change. Multiplying Connections is developing materials and strategies to promote trauma informed and developmentally appropriate care across the public child and family service system in the City of Philadelphia. This capacity building initiative is funded by the William Penn Foundation. www.multiplyingconnections.org

**Prevent Child Abuse PA** is one of 47 chartered state chapters of Prevent Child Abuse America with the mission of preventing the abuse and neglect of Pennsylvania’s children before it ever happens. www.preventchildabusepa.org