

When to Start Discipline

*The University of Pittsburgh
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Luke got into his mother's makeup and painted his face – and the walls. He toppled his father's wine a few days earlier, overturned a plate of hors d'oeuvres, and made mud pies with the dog's food.

The 15-month-old is a terror, his parents confess, but what can they do? He is still too young to discipline, isn't he?

Not at all. This 15-month-old is very much ready for discipline, and the sooner, the better.

Discipline should be seen as guidance, which is more gentle, helpful, and supportive than punishment. It implies teaching – teaching children what they should do as well as what they should not do. It means praise as well as reprimand.

Discipline, but not punishment, can start early. After the age of approximately six months, for example, infants may cry deliberately to get attention. You can tell that's what they want if they cry without tears, pause, and look to see if you noticed. If you want to discourage that behavior, simply ignore it.

Discipline becomes more important when children get older, such as when they begin to crawl and get into things they shouldn't.

Most parents deal with bad behavior on the fly, sometimes reacting impulsively. It is better for parents to think ahead about their attitudes toward discipline and how they intend to implement it.

But being a guiding teacher rather than a policeman doesn't mean you allow children to do anything they want. You still have rules and you enforce them.

But spanking is a type of punishment and is not the best enforcer of rules. Spanking is an abuse of your adult power and can harm the relationship between you and your child. It sends the wrong message by showing a child that when someone does something you don't like, you hit them.

Instead, parents with younger children, such as Luke, should try stopping an undesirable behavior and then encouraging more appropriate activities. For example, for a one-year-old who is playing with the dog food, pick up the child and hold him or her gently, but firmly. Look the child in the eye and say seriously, but not in anger, "No." Then, take the child to another room, encourage play with toys, and then tell or show your child "yes."

Distraction works better with young children. You'll have a better relationship with your child, and you won't feel lousy like many parents do after they spank.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.