

# Parenting During the Elementary School Years, Part 1: Preventing Misbehavior<sup>1</sup>

Millie Ferrer, Anne M. Fugate, and Ingrid Rivera<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction-You and Your Child

Parenting school-age children can be very rewarding. School-age children are expressive and social, and they have a sense of humor. They are curious and like to explore their interests. Every day they are developing skills they will use as adults. Yet, even though they seem to be growing up rapidly, they need your parenting as much as when they were toddlers.

As your child grows up, your role as a parent gradually changes. When your child was a baby, you were primarily a caretaker. When your child grew into a toddler and preschooler, you were a protector and nurturer. Now, as your child is in elementary school, your primary role is encourager. You do not stop taking care of, protecting, and nurturing your child, but encouragement is especially important to your child at this age.

During the elementary school years, your child is beginning to develop a sense of who he is. Through play and work, he is developing a sense of what he likes, what he does well, and what is important to him. Your reactions to, and interest in, how he plays and works shape his view of himself. However, now that he has entered school, his view of himself is no longer shaped just by parents and family. Now it is increasingly shaped by peers and

teachers. He defines his abilities, his popularity, and his appearance by listening to and comparing himself with his peers.

Your encouragement helps your child feel safe to explore new interests and learn new skills. It teaches him that it is okay not to do something perfectly the first time and to try again. Your encouragement and support can also help him cope with any anxiety he may feel about peer pressure and being evaluated by others. It reminds him that he is unique and he does not need to compare himself to others.



Disciplining your child might seem to be at odds with encouraging him, but it is not. In fact, effective discipline is part of your role as an encourager. Effective discipline begins with prevention. This fact sheet talks about what you can do to prevent misbehavior. All of the effort you put into preventing misbehavior is effort well spent. It is easier to prevent misbehavior than to deal with it afterwards. More important,

1. This document is FCS2202, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date September 10, 2002. Updated July 2003. Reviewed March 2007 by Heidi Radunovich, Assistant Professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences. Visit the EDIS Website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
2. Millie Ferrer, Ph.D., Professor; Anne M. Fugate, M.ED., Former Coordinator Educational/Training Programs; and Ingrid Rivera, Ed.S., Former Graduate Assistant, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information, and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions, or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A&M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Larry Arrington, Dean

as you use good prevention strategies, you also help your child become more self-reliant and confident.

### Develop a Warm, Supportive Relationship with Your Child

The kind of relationship a school-age child has with her parents has a big impact on how she views herself. That is why developing a warm, supportive relationship with your child is so important. It helps your child learn to see herself as accepted, valued, and competent.



A warm, supportive relationship with your child can also help you prevent some misbehavior. When you know your child well, you can avoid situations that needlessly provoke her to misbehave. For example, if you know that your child does not like the feel of elastic cuffs, do not buy shirts with them. This will prevent needless arguments over whether she will wear the shirt you spent good money on. To develop a warm, supportive relationship with your child, follow these guidelines:

- **Maintain open communication.** Open communication between you and your child is the basis of a warm relationship. It allows you to express feelings, share interests, and solve problems. To maintain open communication with your child, listen to him carefully. Give him your full attention without disruptions. Sometimes it is hard to listen when you are very busy, but try your best. If you really cannot listen to your child at that moment, tell him you will talk later. Then make sure to do so.
- **Acknowledge your child's feelings.** For example, say to your child "You seem happy" or "Looks like you're really

angry." Children need to know that their feelings are real and that it is okay to show them.



- **Spend time with your child.** The best gift you can give your child is your time. Regularly spend time with your child doing what interests her. For example, if your daughter likes to play softball, practice whatever skill she wants to work on. Or if your daughter likes to play school with her dolls, as she plays the teacher, play along as a student. Your goal is to let your child know you are there for her. Being there for your child on a regular basis helps her feel loved and secure.
- **Accept your child for who he is.** You might wish that your child were in some way different than. You might think that if your child were different, he would have more friends or be better at sports or do better in school. Avoid thinking like this. It will show in your words and actions. Your child will feel that something is wrong with him and that he is not good enough.
- **When you find yourself thinking that your child is too shy or too talkative or too anything,** try to refocus on the positive side of that trait. For example, if you think your child is too talkative, tell yourself, "My child is so curious. He asks good questions," or "My child is very friendly. He likes to meet people."
- **Support your child's interests without imposing your own expectations.** For example, even if you like soccer better, let your son play baseball if that is the game he prefers. Let him play to enjoy the

game. Go to his games and cheer him on without criticizing his performance. When you support your child's interests, he will blossom. He will be more likely to try new things and develop interests and skills on his own.



Even with the warmest, most supportive relationship, your child will still misbehave. However, when you know your child well, you can prevent some misbehavior.

### Provide Opportunities to Make Choices

During the elementary school years, your child's ability to reason is increasing. She is able to make decisions and learn from the experience. When you provide opportunities to make decisions, you are helping your child practice this important skill. You are also preventing some misbehavior.

You can prevent misbehavior by giving your child positive alternatives when you need to say no to her requests. For example, say, "You can't have Michelle spend the night, because it's a school night. You may ask her for Friday or Saturday night if you want." She will be less likely to misbehave out of anger or frustration if she feels she has some control over the situation.

Give your child the opportunity to make choices. For example, let your child spend her birthday money as she chooses, even if you think her choice is impractical. You might talk with her about her options for using her money, but let her make the choice. She will learn from the experience, whether her choice is good or bad. When your child experiences the consequences of her choices, she will eventually learn to make better ones.

### Establish Rules and Consequences

Establishing good family rules will prevent some misbehavior. A child feels more secure when he knows what is expected of him. Rules also help a school-age child practice decision-making. When he knows what is expected of him and chooses to act one way or another, he learns that his behavior has consequences.

When you establish rules, follow these guidelines:

- ***Make sure a rule is necessary.*** Have as few rules as possible, just enough to make it clear how people, pets, and belongings should be treated. If there are too many rules, your child will feel overwhelmed or rebellious.
- ***Make sure rules are appropriate for your child's abilities.*** As your child gets older, revise rules according to his growing physical, mental, and emotional abilities. For example, the family rule might be that everyone has chores. You could expect your ten-year-old to do chores, such as vacuuming the carpet or feeding the dog that he could not do when he was four.
- ***Use more do's than don'ts.*** A positively stated rule does not simply tell a child what not to do—it tells her what she should do. For example, instead of "do not leave a mess," state the rule is "clean up after yourself."
- ***Involve your child in making rules.*** By age seven or eight, children are more likely to follow rules that they help make. For example, you want your seven-year-old to learn how to use his new bike responsibly. Instead of just announcing new rules, talk with him. He will be better about putting his bike away at night if he helped to decide that that is the rule.
- ***Involve your child in deciding on the consequences for breaking rules.*** Consequences should be the natural or logical result of an action. For example, your child does not put his favorite shirt in the laundry. The natural consequence is that it will not be clean the next time he wants to wear it. Sometimes it is impractical and unsafe to let your child

experience the natural consequence of his behavior. In those cases, the consequence should still be related to the behavior as much as possible. For example, your child breaks the rule about wearing his helmet when riding his bike. A logical consequence would be that he is not allowed to ride for a week.



**Very important!!!** Once you have established rules, make sure to enforce them consistently. Even if your rules are really good, if you do not enforce them consistently, they will be ineffective. To help you review or establish new family rules and consequences, see the [worksheet on page 6](#).

### Hold Family Meetings

A family meeting is a time for family members to get together in a supportive way. It is a time to express feelings, make plans and decisions, and solve problems. For example, a family meeting can be used to plan a vacation, schedule chores, or talk about an upcoming move. It can also be used to update the family photo album, negotiate later bed times, or decide whether to get a dog. When family meetings are used well, they help build stronger relationships.

To use a family meeting to make a decision or make plans, follow these guidelines:

- Give every family member a chance to talk about his or her ideas and feelings.
- Brainstorm together to find ideas that address everyone's needs. Respect what everyone has to say. Do not criticize or make fun of anyone's ideas. Write down all ideas.
- After all the ideas are written down, decide which would work best for

everyone. Write down how the family will follow through on the idea. Post your plan where everyone can see it. (To help you get started see the [worksheet on page 7](#)).

Here are a few more guidelines for holding effective family meetings:

- Meet on a regularly scheduled day and time.
- Prepare an agenda for every meeting. Avoid being sidetracked by other issues.
- Begin every meeting on a positive note. Do this by asking each family member to give another member a compliment or by acknowledging the good things that are happening in the family.
- Agree on the length of the meeting and stick to the time table.
- Plan for family fun at every meeting. For example, play games, make ice cream sundaes, or watch a family video. Do not use family meetings just to handle problems and assign chores.

### Model Positive Behavior

As a parent, you teach children what to do by your own example. One of the most effective ways to encourage positive behavior is to model it. Behave the way you want your child to behave. For example, since you want her to respect others, model respect. Say “please” and “thank you” when you talk to her and to others. Be calm, patient, and considerate. Children remember how their parents act and will imitate their behavior in similar situations.

### Conclusion

The strategies in this fact sheet will help you prevent misbehavior. They will also help you encourage and support your child as he becomes more self-reliant.

Remember, though, that no matter how much effort you put into prevention, your child will still

misbehave sometimes. When your child does misbehave, you do not simply want to stop his misbehavior. You want to teach him what to do instead. This is a more long-term goal. Part 2 of **Parenting During the Elementary School Years** talks about discipline strategies to teach your child responsibility and self-control.

[http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/sac16\\_estab.rules.html](http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/sac16_estab.rules.html)

## References

- Brooks, J. (2001). *Parenting*, 5th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.
- Dinkmeyer, D. and McKay, G. 1989. *The parents handbook: Systematic training for effective parenting (STEP)*, 3 ed. Circle Pine, MN: American Guidance System, Inc.
- Faber, A. and Mazlish, E. 1999. *How to talk so kids will listen*, video series. Rye, NY: Faber/Mazlish Workshops, LLC.
- Ferrer, M. 1999. Success and the single parent: Positive parenting–The communication puzzle. Retrieved June 11, 2002 from University of Florida Extension EDIS Web site: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE341>
- Greenspan, S. 1995. *The challenging child*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- Hamner, T. and Turner, P. 2001. *Parenting in contemporary society*, 4th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Temke, M., and Clement, A. 1996. Discipline: Teaching school age children social skills. Retrieved January 30, 2002 from University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Web site: <http://extension.unh.edu/Family/Documents/distchg.pdf>
- Todd, C. 1992. Establishing rules. Retrieved January 30, 2002 from National Network for Child Care Web site:

---

## Family Rules and Consequences

*Use this worksheet to review family rules and consequences or to establish new ones.*

1. Rule: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Rule: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Rule: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Rule: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

---

### **Guidelines for Making a Decision in a Family Meeting**

1. Situation – State the decision that needs to be made or the problem that needs to be solved.

---

---

---

---

---

2. Brainstorming – List everyone’s ideas.

---

---

---

---

---

3. Choose the best solution.

---

---

---

---

---