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Guidance and Discipline for Skill Building Age 4 Summary

Why Guidance and Discipline for Skill Building?

When your four-year-old cries in frustration because they did not get the snack they wanted or gets angry and throws a toy, these situations are opportunities to provide guidance and discipline for skill building.



Before you can get input from your child to understand (and help them understand) what they are feeling, you both need to be calm. Your child will not learn from the situation if you or they are upset.

- Ask yourself if your child is hungry or tired. You could offer a snack or transition to a nap.
- Check on how you are feeling. If you are angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed, take a "parenting time out" and take several deep breaths (it really does help) or sit quietly for a few minutes.
- If your child's basic needs, like hunger or tiredness, are not issues, take additional steps to help them calm down. This might involve offering a hug, helping them take deep breaths, or holding a blanket or stuffed animal.

Three- and four-year-olds are learning to understand their feelings. They are also beginning to understand other people's feelings and how their actions affect others. They will need your support to figure this out. When both you and your child are calm, reflect on your child's feelings so you can be prepared to help. Ask yourself:

- "Does my child have an unmet need?" They might need someone to listen or give them attention, some alone time, or some help so they can be successful at something they are trying to do.
- You can ask them about how they are feeling.
    - *"I noticed your face got red, and your forehead got all scrunched up. So, when you threw the toy, were you feeling frustrated?"*
    - *"I saw you dropped your popsicle on the ground. I wonder if you are feeling sad?"*
    - They seem to be stalling at bedtime by asking for another drink or a snack; you could ask, *"Are you feeling scared?"*
- You can also ask them about how they think others might be feeling.

- *“Your sister cried when you took the toy. How might she be feeling?”*
- *“When your friend didn’t get to take their turn, how do you think they were feeling?”*
- *“When you said that to me, how do you think that made me feel?”*

Trap: Avoid letting the question turn into an accusation. Remember to stay calm and that the goal of the question is to help the child uncover feelings.



- Teach your child positive behaviors. Each time your child misbehaves, ask yourself what positive behavior you need to teach and practice that can replace the inappropriate behavior.
- Teach positive ways to ask for attention. It’s easy to get into a habit of pointing out what children are not doing right. When children are misbehaving to get attention, they have not yet learned how to get attention in positive ways. Consider how your child can seek your attention in acceptable ways. Then, actively teach these kinds of attention-getting behaviors.
- Model assertive communication through I-messages. Here’s an example: “I feel (insert feeling word) when you (name the words or actions that upset you) because (state the impact).” Here’s an example: “I feel sad when you won’t share your toys with others because it hurts their feelings.”
- Begin to teach your child to repair harm. A critical step in teaching children about managing anger is how to repair harm when they’ve caused it. Harm could be physical, like breaking something, or emotional, like hurting someone’s feelings. Mistakes are a critical aspect of their social learning. We all have our moments when we hurt another. But it’s that next step that matters in repairing the relationship.
- Work on your family's feelings vocabulary. Four-year-olds are only beginning to learn about feelings. Notice and name feelings each chance a family member shows an expression to offer plenty of practice. Ask, don’t tell. “*Dad, you look sad. Is that right?*” Being able to identify emotions is the first step in successfully managing emotions.
- Create a calm-down space. During playtime or time without pressure, design a “safe base” or place where your child decides to go when upset to feel better.

Tip: Children learn first through modeling. If you respond to anger by yelling, they will learn to respond to anger by yelling. Consider your reactions to anger. Formulate your new reaction around what you want your child to mimic when they are angry.

Tip: Play feelings guessing games with the family. At a meal, share facial expressions showing a range of emotions and guess what they are.

STEP 3 PRACTICE — Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Accept feelings. If you are going to help your child manage their biggest feelings, it is essential to acknowledge and accept their feelings - even ones you don't like. When your child is upset, consider your response. Instead of focusing on their actions or the problem, focus on their feelings FIRST. You could say, *"You seem upset. I wonder if your blanket could help comfort you. I'm here for a hug or a cuddle if you would like one.?"* Then, focus on teaching and practicing better behavior.
- Use "Show me…" statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When a child learns a new skill, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say: *"Show me how you can ask for attention"* or *"Show me how you can share your toys with your friend."* This practice will prepare your child to use the new skill when they require your attention.
- As your child exerts effort to seek independence, ask for help. Engage your child side by side in taking action together to improve things. For example, they could help you fold some laundry or dust.
- Practice deep breathing. Because deep breathing is a simple way to assist your child anytime, anywhere, it's important to get in plenty of practice to make it easy to use when needed.
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child has caused harm, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support in following through to repair it. They may need to hold your hand through that process, and that's okay! They are learning the invaluable skill of responsible decision-making.

STEP 4 SUPPORT — Support Your Child's Development and Success

- Ask key questions to support their skills. For example, *"You are going to preschool today. Do you remember what you can do if you feel angry or sad?"*
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present new opportunities and challenges, along with stress, frustrations, and anger.
- Encourage friendships. Playmates can be an invaluable source of joy and support for your child.
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different coping strategies can help offer additional support and motivation for your child when challenging issues arise.
- Apply logical consequences when needed. Logical consequences should follow soon after an inappropriate behavior and need to be provided in a way that maintains a healthy relationship. Rather than punishment, a consequence is about supporting the learning process and avoiding harm.
    - First, control your emotions. This is good modeling; when your emotions are in check, you can provide logical consequences that fit the behavior. For example, if your child does not pick up their toys after you ask them to, give them some time, take some deep breaths, and avoid getting angry yourself.

- Second, invite your child to discuss the expectations established in Step 2 about this behavior. Following the same example, ask your child if they remember what they need to do when cleaning up their toys.
- Third, apply a logical consequence as a teachable moment. For example, you might take away their privilege to play with those toys because they did not take appropriate steps to put them away. Remember, the goal is not to punish the child but to have a logical consequence like “I can’t play with a toy if I don't clean up when asked.”



- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it’s easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child's choice. For example, when your child remains calm, a short, specific call out is all that’s needed: *“I noticed you told me about it when you got angry, and we took some deep breaths together. Yes! Excellent.”*

- Recognize small steps along the way. Don’t wait for significant accomplishments—like the full bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.

- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after you've completed your bedtime routine, snuggle and read before bed. Or, in the morning, once you're ready for school, take a few minutes to listen to music together.

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