

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## MANAGING BEHAVIOR AT HOME

Relationships between parents and children are unique and intense. Families are often the happiest when parents and children have the skills to relate and communicate with one another in a warm and positive manner, when parents feel competent in helping their children behave appropriately, and when children are able to express their emotions and behave appropriately.

Most difficulties arise when parents are not sure how to effectively manage their children's behaviors. Oppositional and defiant behavior is not uncommon among toddlers, children and adolescents. Such behavior only becomes a problem when it interferes with overall functioning in daily life in the home and school, with peers or with other adults.

Behavioral problems are the main reason for which children are referred to mental health agencies. Stressful family environments or life events are frequently associated with children's conduct problems. Children with behavior problems can also have a negative impact on their parents' emotional health. For example, research has found that mothers of children who are referred for conduct problems report experiencing more depressive moods compared with other mothers. For children, the presence of conduct problems is strongly related to later psychological, social, and occupational difficulties, as well as to future delinquency. In light of these long-term effects of conduct problems, early intervention is very important.

### What can I do as a parent?

A positive relationship is an important and necessary foundation for increasing your ability to manage your child's behavior and for helping him learn to manage his emotions. Following are some tips that can help you improve your relationship with your child.

- Spend time with your child on a daily basis doing fun activities such as playing with toys and reading. Pay attention to your child's positive behavior by describing what he is doing and by praising his actions whenever possible. For older children, join with them in an activity of their choosing and talk with them. Listen attentively to what your child is saying, without correcting or criticizing.
- Praise your child as frequently as possible when she displays appropriate behaviors. Be specific. Some ways in which you can praise your child include, "Omar, I really like the way you are sharing with your sister" or "Hani, I am glad that you made your bed just as I asked you to."
- Ignore minor attention-seeking misbehaviors, such as whining, as children often misbehave in order to gain their parents' attention. The removal of such attention can be enough of a punishment by itself. Once your child stops misbehaving and begins to display appropriate behavior again, make sure to pay a lot of attention to what he is doing. This means you are *purposely ignoring* behaviors that you *do not want* your child to engage in and are *reinforcing*, with praise, behaviors that you *do want* your child to engage in. In this way you will increase the likelihood that your child will engage in appropriate behaviors and decrease the likelihood that he will engage in inappropriate behaviors.
- Let your child know your specific expectations, such as following directions after two reminders, starting homework by 5:00 p.m., or taking a shower before going to bed. Children often do better when they know what is expected of them and when they are rewarded for their accomplishments. Examples of rewards include verbal praise as well as non-verbal praise such as a hug and tokens such as stickers, small toys, extra TV or computer time. For older children or adolescents, rewards can include later bedtime during the weekends, increased contact with peers or extra allowance.
- Be mindful of how and when you give your child a command or an instruction. Children and adolescents respond better when commands are short and direct and when they are delivered in a neutral or positive tone of voice. Also consider the timing of the command. For example, if your child is watching a television show, wait until a logical stopping point, such as the commercial, to give the command. Also, make sure you then praise your child for complying with the command.

- ❑ Communicate with your child’s teacher if your child’s behavior is a problem at school. Share effective techniques that you use to manage your child’s behavior at home. Establish specific appropriate school behavioral expectations with the teacher and reward your child for engaging in those behaviors.
- ❑ You may use time out and loss of privileges to deal with behaviors that have been difficult to change. Make sure, however, that you also provide opportunities for your child to earn ample positive reinforcement such as verbal praise and rewards. Note that follow-through is important. “Giving in” once the consequence of a behavior has been set undermines the purpose of using time-out or loss of privileges in the first place.
  - Children up to age 7 or 8 years tend to respond well to a 3-5 minute time out during which the child sits on a chair in a place free of distractions. This technique is punishing because during the time out you are removing your attention from your child.
  - For older children and adolescents, the use of time out is not as effective. For this age range, loss of privileges is usually more appropriate. Removing privileges, however, needs to be done carefully. The loss of a privilege has to match the price of the misbehavior. For example, it may be reasonable for a teenager to be grounded for the weekend if he returns home two hours past curfew, but it may not be reasonable to ground him for a month.
- ❑ Finally, take care of yourself. Remember that you cannot take care of your child unless you take care of yourself first. Engage in relaxing and enjoyable activities when you can. These may include taking a bubble bath, going for a walk, exercising, talking to a friend, or simply laying down in a quiet room for a few minutes.

### **What should I avoid doing?**

Avoid the use of physical punishment with your child. Physical punishment usually happens when a parent is angry and this does not create a positive learning experience for a child. It models and teaches hitting and physical aggression, often making the child want to avoid the parent and can have a negative effect on a child’s self-esteem. Additionally, if physical punishment gets out of hand, it can lead to or become child abuse. Other mild non-physical punishments such as time out and/or loss of privileges, as discussed above, can accomplish the same goals for which physical punishment is usually used, without its negative effects.

### **When should I seek professional help?**

It is completely normal for children and adolescents to engage in some oppositional and defiant behaviors. If your child’s behavioral problems start to interfere on a regular basis with how he or she is doing at school or with friends and family, then you should seek professional help. A mental health professional can provide a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation resulting in a specific treatment plan. The good news is that there are well-tested effective behavioral parent training treatments available. Early intervention is important as conduct problems tend to be persistent over a child’s development.

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212)263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-2479.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, [www.AboutOurKids.org](http://www.AboutOurKids.org).



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health  
NYU Child Study Center**

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