



Dazed by Discipline? Oh, Behave Yourself!



When his children misbehave, **Jordan D. Brown** sometimes loses his cool and feels clueless. But now he's discovered the benefits of giving himself a "time out" to reflect on positive discipline methods.

Wild, Whiny, and Out-of-Control

While visiting a bookstore with my family last Sunday, my children did some incredibly helpful things: My daughter Olivia (age 5), for example, ran screaming through the aisles, accidentally knocking over several displays. Meanwhile, my son Finian (age 9) had a wild tickling battle with his sister and some feisty friends, laughing loudly as they crashed into customers. My wife Ellen and I tried to reign them in, but our kids ignored us, and insisted that they "had to have" this book or that DVD. In an effort to impress their friends, Finian and Olivia "talked back" when we tried to calm them down.

Are you wondering, how exactly my children were being "incredibly helpful"? Well, it turns out that I recently had agreed to write about discipline for the Sesame Family Newsletter, so this experience gave me a lot to think and write about.

Discipline is one of those tricky topics that parents like me sometimes find frustrating and confusing. Another dad recently confessed to me, "I just don't get the whole 'time-out' thing. Sure, it works for a few minutes, but I'm not clear what my son really learns in the long run."

It seems to me that parents sometimes forget how powerful their *own* behavior is in terms of setting an example for their children. For example, years ago, when Finian was an infant, I recall watching a mom smack her child, as she yelled, "How *dare* you hit that boy!" Hmmm....

At times, I confuse discipline with punishment. When I let my emotions get the better of me, I forget that the real goal of discipline is to teach kids good behavior, to help them learn right from wrong. I want to emulate level-headed experts such as [Fred Rogers](#) who advised, "By helping our children learn to be self-disciplined, we are also helping them learn how to become independent of us... And we are helping them learn how to be loving parents to children of their own."

Yes, I strive to act with the aplomb of Mister Rogers, but when Olivia or Finian push my buttons, I regretfully morph into Harry Wormwood, the demented dad from Roald Dahl's book *Matilda*, who scolds his daughter: "I'm right and you're wrong, I'm big and you're small, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

So, what did Ellen and I do when our kids misbehaved in the bookstore? Well, normally, we might have cut our losses and escaped to a nearby playground, where they could have gotten out some of their crazy-kid energy. But, that wasn't an option this time. The reason we were at the bookstore was for a reading and signing of a new children's science book that I'd written.

When we eventually left the store, Ellen and I spoke with our children about their inappropriate, out-of-line behavior. We tried to help them understand the reasons behind

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inappropriate, out of line behavior. We tried to help them understand the reasons behind why it would have been better if they had acted less wildly. We asked why they had chosen to ignore our requests to calm down. They responded that they had just gotten caught up in all the fun the other children were having. Ellen and I explained that because of their misbehavior in the store, they would lose TV-watching privileges for several days. They weren't happy with the consequences, but accepted them.

Positive, Creative Solutions to Discipline Problems

Finian and Olivia usually get along fabulously. They share, speak kindly to each other, and respect each other's wishes. But, of course, there are times when they transform into poster children for sibling rivalry. For example, when we're driving in the car, they will fight their boredom by poking each other, having screaming contests, or worse. Rather than pulling over to settle things down, I sometimes snap. Instead of calmly defusing the situation, I mistakenly make off-the-wall threats like, "When we get home, I'm throwing out all of your toys!"

The only good thing about losing my cool is that it gives me a wonderful opportunity to calmly apologize for threatening to throw away their toys and to give them a loving hug.

Since the bookstore incident, I've thought and read a lot about discipline and strategies for encouraging good behavior. I've also spoken with other parents for their advice on what strategies have worked with their children. Here are some other ideas from moms, dads, and grandparents that have helped me:

* **Remember Kids' Limits:** I sometimes forget that my children can have very different attention spans or energy levels than I do. At the end of a long day, when I sense they are almost burned-out, I have to fight the urge to say, "Okay, kids, let's do ONE more errand!"

* **Pick Your Battles:** Try not to get upset at your children every time they spill something, squabble with a friend or sibling, or say something "inappropriate." Don't forget the power of ignoring, and letting things pass. Also, try to remember that many [sharing-related squabbles](#) can be resolved through compromise as [Snuffy and Big Bird discover](#).

* **Consistency and Consequences:** Before entering into a potentially volatile parenting situation (such as a trip to the supermarket, when your children are overtired and wired), have a quiet conversation about what behavior is expected, and let them know what the consequences will be if they misbehave. And then follow-through (see below).

* **Don't Cave In:** Once you lay down the law, avoid being wishy-washy. Shortly before dinner, when one of my kids begs for the 27th time, "Pleeeeeease, Dad, can I have the candy bar!" at the supermarket, it is important to remember that if I cave in, I'm reinforcing all the bad behavior that lead up to it.

* **"Smile, You're on Parent Camera!":** A trick I've found helpful when chaos is flourishing around you and your kids is to pretend that you're the star of a reality parenting TV show, and millions of people around the world are watching your every move. How can you turn around a sticky situation with your wits rather than screaming?

* **Keep Your Sense of Humor:** The other day, Finian and Olivia were acting up in a pharmacy, as I was trying to concentrate on what we needed to buy. I scolded my kids more harshly than I should have. To Finian's credit, rather than lashing back, he got a panicky look on his face, pointed down the aisle, and said, "Look, Daddy, there's the Parent Police." He then said in a mock-official elderly voice, "Mr. Brown, you're under arrest! Take him away, boys." We all laughed and the tension was broken. I gave Finian a hug, and told him how funny he had just been. And, miraculously, the kids were well-

Siblings fight over a stuffed bear.



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behaved the rest of the time in the store. (It's true--you can't be laughing and furious at the same time.)

Good luck as you try to bring out the best in your children--and yourself!

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