

THOMAS M. REIMERS, Ph.D.

HELP!



There's a  
**Toddler**  
in the  
**House!**



for parents of **2** to **6** year olds

Proven Strategies to Survive and Thrive through  
the **Mischief, Mayhem, and Meltdowns**

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Proven Strategies for Parents of 2- to 6-Year-Olds to Survive  
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THOMAS M. REIMERS, Ph.D.



Boys Town, Nebraska

## **Help! There's a Toddler in the House!**

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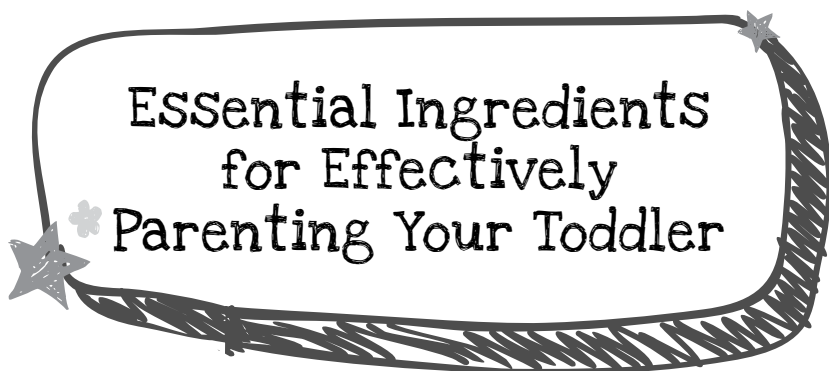
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**A crisis, resource and referral number for kids and parents**

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## Essential Ingredients for Effectively Parenting Your Toddler

*“Before I got married I had six theories about bringing up children; now I have six children and no theories.”*

– John Wilmot, English Poet

I don’t know about you, but no one handed my wife and me a manual when we walked out of the hospital with our children. Actually, that’s a good thing. Because of the uniqueness of children, having a manual, even if one existed, wouldn’t do much good. It also would remove a lot of the fun that comes with parenting. Did I say fun? Yes, I said fun. Now you may be rolling your eyes and saying to yourself, “Fun was the last thing I had on my mind when reaching for this book – more like frustration.” Everyone seems to have an opinion about parenting. That may explain why so many bookshelves bend low from the weight of all that advice being put into paperback. Some of these “how to” parenting books emphasize the “art” of parenting while others emphasize the “science.” Most make promises about revealing the truth about parenthood. In these pages, you will discover something new about all three – the art, science, and truth of parenting.

As a clinical psychologist for more than twenty years, I have had the pleasure and honor of working with thousands of parents,

children, and families. Much of my advice and counsel has been rooted in science. Over time, however, I have found myself emphasizing the art of parenting. It's not very difficult to describe the facts and science of human behavior. The challenge is knowing how to use that knowledge in a positive and purposeful manner when it comes to your own family. It's a subjective endeavor because there is no such thing as parenting absolutes. At least not absolute truth. The uniqueness and challenges that come with each and every child, coupled with the often complicated and varied experiences that parents bring to their families, literally make it impossible to claim absolute truth. Yet, there are many time-tested principles and strategies that make family life more enjoyable for a vast majority of parents and children. I will do my best to describe those strategies in these pages.

My hope is that this book will provide you with practical techniques that will make parenting easier and help you appreciate the uniqueness and challenges that your child brings to your world. Your child is a work of art, and most great works of art, like Rome, were not built in a day. Parenting is a lifelong endeavor that is constantly shaped and changed by many seen and unforeseen events. The techniques involved in the science and art of parenting can be learned. When combined with parents' love and commitment to their children, the outcome is almost always positive.

Here are nine essential ingredients to serve as "food for thought" as it pertains to shaping, managing, and teaching behavior.

## Parents Are Teachers

When our children are born, our first concern is their health and well-being. We want them to be healthy and grow and develop normally. Once we get past those concerns, we want them to behave. Eventually that cute bundle of joy will start crawling, climbing, walking, and talking. Our concerns go from their health to their behavior. We are forced to think about how we are going to discipline them. Unfortunately, many people see little difference between discipline and punishment. In part, that is because many parents were themselves raised by parents who believed in the "spare the rod, spoil the child" philosophy. Perhaps you remember a parent's occasional use of physical punishment more vividly than any affectionate pat on the

back or hug. Therefore, it's important that you determine what discipline means to you and what approach you will take to teach your child all of the positive behaviors, social skills, and appropriate language he needs to be successful in life. It's important to adopt or develop a general philosophy of discipline, including what actions that involves. I use the word "discipline" throughout this book because it has a general meaning for most of us. By discipline, I'm referring to the behavior-changing strategies you use to teach and promote positive behaviors and to decrease negative behaviors.

When you think of the word "punishment," what does it mean to you? Punishment, by definition, means that a behavior stops or decreases following an action a parent takes in response to a child's behavior. In other words, your child does something you don't like so you do something your child doesn't like, and the behavior stops or decreases. Taking away a child's outside playtime because he pulled his sister's hair, for example, hopefully decreases how often he pulls her hair in the future. Sometimes, it's not so much what a parent does but what a child does to himself. Touching a hot stove stops him from touching the stove again, at least for a while. Getting bitten by a growling dog limits or stops him from petting growling dogs in the future, or he avoids all dogs for a period of time. Punishment decreases, eliminates, or suppresses behavior. Because of that, it plays an important role in each of our lives and also should play a role in your job as parent and disciplinarian. However, punishment should be a **part** of your discipline approach, not your entire approach. All children, even adults, need to receive some corrective actions in order to learn. All of the negative consequences that are applied to children's inappropriate behavior should get their attention, correct the misbehavior, and discourage children from doing it again. In essence, punishment has a role, but not in the way that most of us tend to think about punishment. It should certainly be the smallest part of your overall discipline approach. Parents who use punishment as their only method of discipline often raise children who are angry, aggressive, or experience unnecessary guilt about their behavior.

If discipline is not punishment, then what is it? Effective discipline involves teaching. Teaching includes verbal instructions, modeling, practice, correction, and praise. When it comes to your child's behavior, you are your child's teacher and disciplinarian. Discipline

should involve a combination of teaching strategies that include the following:

### **Information and Instruction**

Your children need to know what is expected of them before they can do it. They need you to clearly communicate your expectations in a variety of ways. Just as you were not handed a manual on how to take care of and manage your newborn when you left the hospital, no child is born with an internal instruction guide on how to behave.

### **Modeling and Training**

Teaching involves telling, showing, and demonstrating how to do something and what it looks like. A large percentage of what children learn at this age comes from watching parents, siblings, and peers. As your child's teacher, you need to be good at modeling and demonstrating behavioral expectations. With your toddler or preschooler, this will involve a lot of effort in telling, showing, and demonstrating appropriate behaviors.

### **Carrots and Sticks**

The carrots are the smiles, comments, and gestures you make to let your child know that you are pleased with her behavior. This might involve nothing more than a gentle touch or kind word. The important thing is that you don't take your child's good behavior for granted. Let her know that you are aware of what she did or said. Don't make the mistake of taking good behavior for granted because "that's what she is supposed to do." Frequent praise or positive attention increases the likelihood that you will see the appropriate behavior again and provides a nice contrast for your child when you correct her behavior. Discipline also involves letting your child know what she did wrong. Correction (the stick) can take different forms and vary depending on your child's age and the misbehavior. This might include a frown, a verbal reprimand, time-out, or removing a privilege.

### **Repetition and Practice**

Your child likely won't "get it" the first, second, or third time

you teach or correct a behavior. Be prepared to provide the same consequence over and over again to help your child get the message. Children do not learn as quickly as adults, and they need lots of practice and repetition. This can be tiring and exhausting at times, but it's a necessary part of shaping and changing behavior.

Effective discipline includes an array of teaching techniques that start with the most positive and least restrictive strategies and progresses to the point where your child's behavior is shaped and transformed to its most desirable.

## Anger IS Not a Parenting Tool

Why do parents get angry at a child? Maybe it's because their son gave the cat a milk bath, or he sent twenty-five Hot Wheels zooming down the heating vent. Maybe their anger resulted from the thrown spaghetti that landed in the elderly lady's hair at the local diner. Or, it could be the masterpiece their little Picasso created on the freshly painted wall. The causes are endless. But the fundamental reason that parents become angry is the same – they care.

There is no one you love more, worry more about, spend more time thinking about, or spend more time with than your child. Because of the bond you have with your child, you're going to experience a range of emotions, including anger.

There is absolutely nothing objective about being a mom or dad. That is why discipline can be such a challenge. If parents could strip the emotion out of their behavior-management and discipline strategies, they would be much more effective. That's why most parents would likely be better at managing the behaviors of their friends' or neighbors' children than their own. Let's face it, when somebody else's child calls the guy at the checkout stand "fatso," you're glad the little one isn't one of yours, but you're not going to get emotionally upset. (You might even laugh.)

The frustration parents experience when they are angry or emotionally upset is at one end of the emotional spectrum. On the other end is all the joy and happiness that come from the wonderful moments and positive experiences children bring to a family. Of course, it's easy to be happy, smiling, and praising children when things are

going well. The challenge is figuring out how to control anger and frustration when things do not go as planned.

No one cares about your child more than you do. Therefore, when it comes to helping your child develop positive behavior, you may need to spend time identifying what triggers your anger and frustration and how best to manage those feelings. Remember, when it comes to managing behavior, you are the teacher. Good teaching requires good communication. Think of the last time someone – coach, boss, or stranger – yelled at you or vice versa. Were the screams effective? Did you learn a lot? Did you respond by getting angry, or did you do something to stop the person from yelling and screaming? Anger is often the result of frustration. When it comes to children, your frustration can result from a wide range of events, some of which include specific misbehaviors. Other times it is the circumstances, not the children, that prove frustrating, especially when you lack the tools (self-control, behavior-management, and communication skills) to manage a situation. And even if you have the tools, they are much less useful if you're yelling and screaming.

The bottom line is that there are countless things that can upset the apple cart and make you frustrated. Here are a few suggestions to help you keep your emotions in check:

***Be realistic.***

Being realistic means focusing on your child's behavior at a given moment and helping her learn a new behavior or skill as best she can without always basing it on what other children her age are doing. Being realistic about your child's behavior and ability to behave as expected in certain situations will keep you from becoming overly frustrated by unreasonable expectations. Look at your child's behavior in the context of age, development, and the situation. The behavior of young children is like the weather, wait an hour or so, and it will change. Some children achieve certain skills and behaviors early, some later. However, in time, nearly all children achieve the skills and behaviors they need to be successful. No matter what the behavior or the situation, remember "This too shall pass."

***Break the cycle.***

Moms and dads are aware of certain behavior-changing techniques because they learned them from their parents or acquired

them on their own. Sometimes parents don't want to repeat those techniques, such as corporal punishment or yelling, with their children. For example, some parents come from families that scream. They come from generations that communicated and interacted with each other by talking loudly at best and yelling at worst. When so much yelling and screaming goes on, it can become the norm. If this or other negative discipline habits have become the norm in your family, you have probably found that they are not only ineffective, they're exhausting. The good news is that as you develop more effective strategies to add to your collection of discipline tools, the need to always scream, spank, or give in will disappear.

***Know what hot buttons trigger your anger.***

A hot button may be a child's behavior that seems to occur over and over again and one which you have difficulty managing. (Your son always tells you "No," for example). It might be a behavior (say, whining) that occurs only in certain environments, such as a church or store. Perhaps the behavior is relatively minor to others, but for some reason embarrasses you. In any respect, it's important to be aware of the specific behaviors or situations that cause your frustration level to go up or cause you to get angry. Additionally, it's important to be aware of those physical and emotional cues that tell you you're becoming angry or frustrated. Those cues can vary but might include physical changes, such as a flushed face or increased heart rate. Or maybe you dwell on negative thoughts or engage in negative self-talk. It's also important to be aware of events that have absolutely nothing to do with your child. Perhaps you're having a bad day because a friend moved away, a spouse lost a job, or the family pet died. We all experience events on a regular basis that cause us to feel sad or frustrated. These events set the stage for more frustration and less patience when it comes to managing children's behavior. Being aware of them can help you avoid taking your feelings out on your child.

***Use discipline techniques that are not emotionally upsetting to you.***

Regardless of the techniques you use, it's important that you feel comfortable using them and believe they will produce the behavior change you want. If you find yourself becoming emotionally

upset because of a strategy, technique, or consequence, stop using it and find another approach. When parents use strategies that are emotionally upsetting to them, they tend to use them inconsistently and mostly out of frustration. Techniques that are used inconsistently and out of frustration almost always lead to ineffective behavior management. Because you need to use these tools on a regular and consistent basis, you must be comfortable and confident enough to use them. Although they may be time consuming and exhausting, the discipline and teaching techniques themselves should not cause you emotional distress.

### ***Have a plan.***

Being aware of the triggers or hot buttons that push you over the edge is one thing, but having a strategy or plan in place to handle them is another. The situations and circumstances surrounding those triggers will likely determine what you can do to manage them. What you do will vary greatly depending on whether you are home alone with your child or at a public event. Having a plan can involve taking a brief break, going for a walk, taking some deep breaths, calling a friend, or reading. Strategies like this can help you manage your frustration and deal more effectively with your child's behavior.

### ***Practice putting out small fires.***

It's always easiest to put a fire out after the first spark or when the flame is low. Once the fire is raging, there is little you or anyone else can do. Thus, a good time to practice using anger-control strategies are when fairly minor and insignificant events occur. Behaviors that cause a mild irritation or annoyance offer a good opportunity to practice positive self-control strategies. Practicing ways to manage your frustration when you're fairly calm puts you in a good position to use those strategies when your frustration is high, and your anger is starting to build. Waiting to use those techniques until the fire is raging may be too late.

### ***Have a back-up plan.***

A back-up plan usually involves having some additional support. We all get to a point where everything we try generates little success, and we need some outside support. Having a friend or family member you can call, a neighbor who can watch your children, or

someone who can stop by and lend a hand may be enough to get you through some rough patches. Make a list of individuals who will support you when you need it most.

### ***Give yourself a break.***

There will absolutely be times when you lose control, yell, and get angry beyond anything you thought possible. The tendency for many parents is to become frustrated with their child and themselves. As human beings, we are emotional and because we are emotional, we become angry. It happens to all of us. Take time to recognize that “Yes, I am human” and “I’m not perfect.” Once you calm down, take time to look at the situation, think about what you could have done differently, and plan how you will do things differently next time. If necessary, apologize to your child or anyone else who felt your wrath. The frustration you feel toward your child and with yourself will lessen as your ability to manage behaviors improves.

## **Consistency Counts**

Being consistent means being predictable. “No” means “No,” and “Yes” means “Yes.” Consistency implies that the rules are the same day in and day out and that following or disobeying those rules will always result in the same consequence – positive or negative.

Just as you come to expect certain levels of predictability and reliability from those you live, socialize, and work with, your children also learn how predictable and reliable you are in enforcing expectations and consequences for their behavior. That pattern of predictability, or consistency, sets the foundation for how effective you will be at managing behavior and family relationships. This is especially true if your children are difficult, strong willed, and persistent with their behavior.

Consistency is important because it helps your child’s world become more predictable. Increased predictability gives your child a greater sense of security. Predictability can apply to everything from daily schedules and bedtime routines to your child knowing that picking up toys when asked will result in a smile or hug. Being consistent when it comes to behavior management allows children to make informed decisions about their behavior and lets them know that you

are in charge. When you establish clear boundaries and predictably apply positive and negative consequences, your children will feel more secure. Just as your children might find it confusing if their teacher gives them different answers to the same questions, they can get confused if you respond differently or not at all to the same behavior (throwing a toy block at the cat results in time-out on one occasion and no consequence on another, for example). Your children will learn best, and behave better, if they hear or receive the same response to the same behavior from you over and over. On the other hand, if your responses differ or are non-existent (doing nothing), it will take much longer for your children to learn what it is you're trying to teach (if they learn at all).

What happens if you're not consistent? First of all, it's important to clarify what consistent means. Nobody is consistent one hundred percent of the time. When I refer to consistency, I'm suggesting you be as predictable as you can and follow through to the best of your ability. I realize there are all kinds of circumstances that get in the way of being consistent. Many of those you can control. Later, I will discuss how you can improve your consistency.

What happens when there is a lack of consistency? First, it takes much longer for children to learn when the "message" is inconsistent. For example, say seventy percent of the time a teacher tells students that one plus one equals two. The rest of the time, the teacher provides a different answer. So, thirty percent of the time students are told a different (wrong) answer. Is seventy percent consistency good enough? If you want to learn math or change behavior, the answer is no. Of course, no parent (or teacher for that matter) can be consistent **all** the time. However, if you have difficulty being predictable and consistent, don't be surprised if your child does not respond to your discipline efforts and does not change his behaviors as quickly as you would like.

For certain behaviors, inconsistency makes things worse. For example, if your toddler's whining has a big payoff (getting more attention or getting something he wants), it may be worth it to him to continue whining even if the payoff only occurs a small part of the time. Let's say that eighty percent of the time you consistently apply a negative consequence when your son whines. You may end up teaching him to whine louder and more frequently because twenty

*"This is a really terrific, must have, book. The strategies are so easy to understand and implement. Dr. Reimers' common sense treatment approaches are invaluable tools for parents and a wonderful reference for professionals."*

— GINA RICHMAN, Ph.D.  
Director, Child and Family Therapy Clinic, Kennedy Krieger Institute  
Assistant Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

**Toddlers and preschoolers are unpredictable**, and their antics often keep parents guessing: Why won't my five-year-old eat his veggies? Why does my two-year-old keep biting her sister? Why can't my three-year-old stay in his own bed? Why must I repeat myself every time I tell my daughter to do something?

The naughty as well as challenging behaviors of young children can drive even the most patient parents to their wits' end. In these pages, parents learn how to cope with and correct many of the most common behavioral problems that little ones demonstrate:

- ★ Hitting, kicking, pinching and biting
- ★ Refusing to eat at mealtime
- ★ Refusing to sleep at bedtime
- ★ Throwing tantrums for attention
- ★ Ignoring instructions
- ★ Fighting with siblings

Each chapter examines a specific problem, from the mildly irritating to the downright maddening, and describes practical strategies to rein in, correct and prevent it. Also included are special chapters on how to use time-out correctly, potty train a toddler, and how moms and dads can create a more rewarding and enriching family life.



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