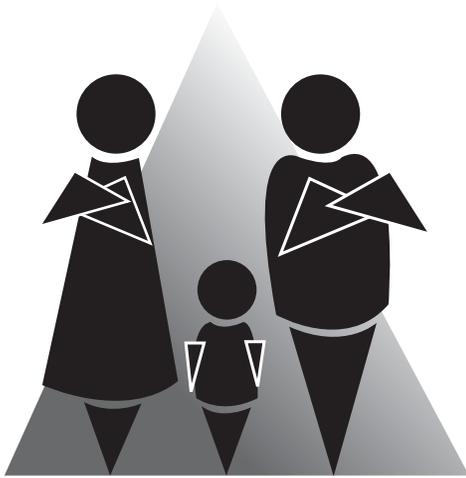


EXTENSION PROGRAMS

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Are Your Children in the
MIDDLE
 of Your Conflict or Divorce?

Disciplining Children

You stagger in the door with the last bag of groceries after a long day at work. You start thinking about what to make for dinner. The phone rings just as your 13-year-old daughter spills her soft drink all over the mail. Your 4-year-old son starts yelling, running around the kitchen and hitting his sister. What should you do? We all have days when nothing seems to go smoothly. It would be easy for us to be angry and yell at our children. Yet, we know this probably won't make the situation better.

Children misbehave for many reasons.

- They are seeking attention.
- They are imitating a parent's behavior.
- They are testing the parent.
- They are standing up for themselves.
- They are protecting themselves.
- They feel bad about themselves.
- They are hungry, tired or ill.

Sometimes it's hard to know how to discipline children. All parents wonder if they're too strict or not strict enough. You may not have disciplined your children before your divorce. Still, it is now possible for you to discipline your children effectively. Think about what you want to teach your children and what they learn by watching your behavior.

Discipline and Divorce

Tell your children what is happening and what changes they can expect because of the divorce. It is important for you to help your children understand they did not cause the divorce. Recognize that this may be a hard time because of family stress. Expect this stress to have an effect on your children. Don't excuse your children's behavior because you feel bad about how the divorce is affecting them. Provide consistent, positive discipline and expect good behavior. Assure

your children they will be cared for. Try to reduce conflict between yourself and the other parent. Research indicates that highly conflicted divorces have a much more negative impact on children. You and the other parent are the most important people in your children's lives.

Discipline and Stress

Single parents often feel overwhelmed. They have a lot of responsibility, plus the stress of not having another parent to talk to. Studies show that single parents have increased stress related to budgeting their money, meeting their children's needs, trying to do too many things, balancing a social life with work and home responsibilities, and maintaining relationships with former spouses or partners.

When stress piles up, it's hard to cope with discipline problems. There's not enough time in the day! How can you possibly take time to think about positive ways to discipline your children? On the other hand, your children's misbehavior adds to your stress.

There are steps you can take to discipline well under stress. You can:

- Decide on what behavior you'll expect from your children.
- Talk to them about your expectations.
- Set rules for your children, with their input.
- Decide, along with your children, what will happen if the rules aren't met.

Remember to ask for your children's input when setting rules and the results of not following them. That way they'll be more willing to obey the rules and accept the results.





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Discipline Is Teaching

Think about these questions.

- ▶ How do you want your children to relate to others?
- ▶ How do you want your children to feel about themselves?
- ▶ How do you want your children to feel about responsibility?
- ▶ Most parents want their children to feel good about themselves, to solve problems, to get along with others and to be responsible.

Clarify Your Expectations

As a parent, it's natural and beneficial to set rules for your children. But it's also important to think: Are my rules fair? Are my children the right age to follow them?

What behavior do you expect from your child in each of the following areas? Write down what is fair to expect.

- personal care (dressing, grooming, etc.)
- chores at home
- bedtime and mealtime

Are your children able to follow through, based on their ages or developmental levels, personalities and schedules?

For example, your 6-year-old daughter can dress herself and comb her hair. She can't lace and tie her shoes or braid her hair. Your 15-year-old son can walk the dog and wash the dinner dishes. He can't help prepare the meal because he plays sports after school.

Helping children feel successful is one of the important roles of a parent. If your children are old enough to help decide what will be expected of them, include them in making the decisions. Talk about each area so it's clear what is expected. If they're involved in setting rules, they are more likely to be obedient and feel successful.

Setting Limits

Here are some tips to consider when setting rules or limits.

1) Have only a few limits. Explain why a rule is important. "If you don't go to an after-school program, you're likely to get involved in risky behavior. You need adult supervision and fun activities to do while I'm working." Let children know that rules don't happen by chance. There's a reason why they're important and should be followed. Some reasons for having rules may be to keep your child and others safe, to show respect for others and to protect property.

- 2) Think about why your child is misbehaving.**
- ▶ Does my child know the rules?
 - ▶ Is my child having a bad day?
 - ▶ Is my child doing what others are doing?
 - ▶ What else is going on that might affect my child's actions?

3) When thinking about the results of misbehaving, ask yourself, "What can my child learn right now?" If your child colors on your papers, what would be a logical consequence or outcome? Would you take her crayons away for a day or send her to her room for an hour? Taking the crayons away and telling her you are angry is the most logical consequence. When a grade school child or adolescent breaks a rule, ask him or her to state the rule and the consequences.

4) Enforce limits firmly and consistently. If you enforce the rules only sometimes, your child won't know if you really mean what you say. A child won't learn to put toys away if sometimes he's yelled at, sometimes nothing happens and sometimes you put them away for him.

5) Focus on do's. Say things in a positive way so your child knows what to do. Instead of saying, "Don't put your coat on the floor," say, "Put your coat in the closet."

6) Celebrate your child's successes. Give your child attention when she follows the rules, not just when she misbehaves. When your son cleans the garage and your daughter helps you carry the groceries, let them know how happy you are for their help. They'll feel good about themselves!

7) Re-evaluate limits and expect children to test limits. It's common for children to see how far they can go beyond a limit. Be calm and consistent.

Build Your Child's Self-image

How you communicate with and discipline your child are important in developing your child's self-esteem. When a child misbehaves, separate the behavior from the child. Ask questions. For example say, "I'm worried because there is soda all over the mail. I may not be able to read it. What should we do about it?" rather than "Can't you do anything without messing it up?"

Use "I" messages to help describe how the child's behavior makes you feel. This helps children see how their behavior affects others. For example say, "I'm angry that my papers are colored blue and green" rather than "You're a bad, bad girl. You ruined my papers."



Are Your Children in the MIDDLE of your Conflict or Divorce?

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Sometimes children misbehave because they don't know how to handle their emotions. You can help your children express their feelings by talking about what they're feeling. One way to do this is to model the behavior.

For example, tell your children how you felt when a car cut in front of you on the highway. Let them know you were angry or scared, but you didn't act on feelings and speed to get in front of the car. Instead you took deep breaths and counted to 20 until you calmed down.

Children need to feel important, special and loved. Although you may feel the need to respond to your child's misbehavior, it's just as important to pay attention to behavior you approve of. Praise your children when they follow directions or clear their plates without reminders.

How will you let your children know they are special and loved?

Check ideas from this list.

- ▶ Assure your children they will be cared for.
- ▶ Give children lots of positive touch.
- ▶ Believe in the good in your children.
- ▶ Spend time doing special activities with your children.
- ▶ Tell your children you love them.
- ▶ Thank your children for helping with family tasks.
- ▶ Use kind words, and be polite.
- ▶ Really listen to what your children are saying.
- ▶ Talk calmly and warmly to your children, look them in the eyes when you talk and pay close attention to what they are saying.

What to Do When Children's Behavior is Disruptive

It's sometimes easy for parents and children to become locked in a cycle of conflict. The following ideas can help you avoid conflict or get you and your child out of a conflict cycle.

Remain calm

Separate yourself from the situation for a few minutes.

Talk

Discuss specific rules when you're both calm. Focus on one or two behaviors that are causing a problem. Discuss them with your children. If your children can read, post the rules in their rooms or on the refrigerator door.

What will happen if

Discuss the outcomes when your children don't follow the rules. Explain the consequences or outcomes in a caring voice. Make sure the consequences are fair for a child's stage of development and temperament. The consequences should be related to the

misbehavior and carried out immediately after the misbehavior.

Praise the behavior you like. Children need to know what they've done well. They also need to feel loved. You may want to give a reward for the specific behavior your child is working on. This reward could be a treat or a privilege.

Provide positive choices for your child. For example, "You can't go to Aunt Mary's for dinner tonight because we're having a family dinner. But after dinner you can visit her or go to dinner at her house tomorrow night."

What About Spanking?

Although spanking may seem to stop a misbehavior at the time, it does more harm than good. Spanking is not effective at improving a child's behavior. Many parents may spank because they're angry, don't know what else to do or were hit as children. They may think it's the only thing that works. There are other ways to discipline that are more effective.

Discipline is about teaching, and spanking doesn't teach children. It hurts children physically and emotionally. Children don't learn the right things to do and will most likely do the same things again when you're not around. Children also learn that it's OK to hit other people, people who love you hit you and violence is a way to deal with problems.

Things to Remember

- ▶ Increase ways to calm down. No one should react when they are very angry.
- ▶ Take a breather. Get away for a few minutes, talk to a friend, take deep breaths, take a walk.
- ▶ Pay attention to good behavior and praise the child.
- ▶ Explain why you're upset or angry. Use "I" statements.
- ▶ Use reasoning, and calmly enforce the consequences for breaking a rule.
- ▶ Think about what your child should learn, and remember, hitting doesn't teach your child anything positive. It teaches them only to hit.
- ▶ Take a break. Separate the child from the situation for a few minutes.
- ▶ Change the environment so your child avoids misbehaving.
- ▶ Ignore some behaviors, like making funny faces.



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- ▶ Trust yourself. You know your children best.
- ▶ One of the most important things as you divorce is your relationship with your children.

Keep a Positive Attitude

1) Don't blame yourself. Raising children is difficult, especially for a single parent with many parenting roles. Take time to see the whole picture. Think about what you want to teach your children.

2) Build on family strengths! When you identify and build the strengths of your children and your family, everyone benefits.

3) Find sources of support! Talk with a friend, another parent, a support group, a counselor or a member of the clergy. Join a parenting education class. You're not alone. Find others to talk to and share the challenges and pleasures of parenting.

If you are interested in more information on this and other related topics, please call your local LSU AgCenter parish office. Below is the list of topics in the "Are Your Children in the Middle of Your Conflict or Divorce?" series.

A Child's View of Divorce
The Business of Co-parenting
Coping with Stress and Change
Costs of Raising Children
Custody Issues Today
Dating Issues
Disciplining Children
Friendship and Support
Help! I Feel Overwhelmed
Loss of a Relationship
Managing Income and Expenses
Not Enough Hours in the Day
Separating Your Finances
Sharing Parenting
Talking with Your Children
Talking with Your Children About Money
Talking with Your Children -- Communicating
Within Your Family: Active Listening
Visitation Do's and Don'ts

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