

When Does Discipline Begin?

Editor's Pick. Written by Kelly Bartlett.

Parents often ask, "When should I start disciplining my child? At what age is it appropriate?" It is a common question of when it's time to transition from the nurturing parenting of babyhood to using more of the "discipline" tools of toddlerhood and beyond.

To answer this, we first need to clarify what discipline actually is. I have come away from using the term "discipline" in the traditional sense. That is, in which the definitions include "punishment" and "control gained by enforcing obedience or order." (Merriam-Webster)

I think in this age of informed parenting, in which we know so much more about how children grow, learn, and thrive, that definition of discipline as applied to parenting is becoming obsolete. When we know that children respond to adult leadership when a respectful relationship is in place, there is no need to adhere to the authoritarian style of traditional "discipline" to raise competent kids. When we realize that behavior is a form of communication, relationship must be the goal in order to foster that communication. And when relationship is the goal, there is no need for punishment. The true necessity, then, is to build and sustain securely attached relationships and not let the shame and fear of "discipline" get in the way.

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