



Discipline and Boys who are Under Five

(A brief guide)

A Boys' Development Project publication





Why this booklet?

This booklet aims to help parents understand their son and also provides a series of techniques to encourage him to listen, engage and accept discipline and boundaries. The second part of the booklet is an explanation of why the techniques work.

While the points in this booklet are about boys, it doesn't mean that yours will fit into every category. Being male is important, but even if a boy has an older sister it can affect how 'boyish' he is. If you have picked this booklet up it probably means that your boy is lively, has views about what he does and may even have selective hearing (only listening to what he wants to), therefore much of this booklet is likely to describe your son.

This booklet has been written for parents of boys under five to give very practical guidance to effective discipline and boundaries.

It accompanies BDP's About Boys Course (ABC 0-5), Boys Preparing for School course and also our Community Aunties programme.

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June 2010

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Techniques that work

Here are 17 techniques that work with most boys. They are not difficult, but the more you try them the more they will work.

Touch and Talk

If you want his attention, touch your son on the arm. Even if he looks away his ears will open. This isn't a grip or a tug, just a touch.

Low and Slow

If you want him to listen to what you say, you will need to deepen your voice and slow down your speech. This is just low and slow, not aggressive or angry.



Fewer words

Whatever you want him to do, strip it down to as few words as possible without commentary. If you go from 'I've asked you ten times to put those toys away, you're doing my head in,' to 'TOYS AWAY PLEASE.' then you can drop all of the 'can you', 'would you'.

Right words

Boys take words literally. If you say 'in a minute' he will think you mean 'in a minute'. If you say 'you can walk on ahead' without saying 'near enough so you can hear me if I call,' he will go further than you want. This will only increase, so get used to it now.

Know the rules

Boys need to be told the rules; they rarely ask what they are. Assume he doesn't know how to behave in a supermarket, so tell him 'here we walk,' 'the trolley is pushed slowly,' 'we put in the basket what is on the list.' Boys often see the world as a playground, so if there are rules they need to be told them, and often more than once.

Eyes and mouth

When we deepen our tone, our sons will look at us to make sure that our eyes and mouth match our words. If you are speaking firmly, but having trouble not laughing, or feeling bad because you are telling him off, your eyes will give that away. Make sure that your words, eyes and mouth are all saying the same thing.

Look over here

If he is becoming too focussed on something that is likely to lead to him getting upset, then draw his attention onto something else, such as another toy; something funny; someone else; or another activity.



This or This

Boys will often react to what you ask them to do. If you give him a choice then he will engage with the choice. So rather than saying 'eat your sweetcorn' ask him if he is going to eat his rice or his sweetcorn first.

NO

Especially if you tend to give him a lot of explanations and certainly if he knows he should not be doing it, a very firm NO will do the trick. If he is about to throw something at someone, say NO firmly, but not aggressively or threateningly. An explanation can follow later, but he needs to know there is no negotiation.



Nip in the bud

Some parents say they ask their sons to do something ten times and then shout. Sometimes this is about timing; if you use the techniques above when you can see that something WILL become a problem, then both of you are more relaxed. Sort it out before it becomes a drama.

Three-week rule

Boys form habits quickly. If you use any of these techniques consistently for three weeks they will become habit and you will find you need to use them less and less.

Walk and Talk

A lot of boys find it easier to talk when on the move. We ask boys to sit down and talk, but they are often more comfortable when they are in motion. If you have to have a difficult conversation, then try walking him around the block.



Time Out for YOU

Usually Time Out is suggested as a way for the child to sit by themselves, so they are able to reflect on what they have done. This does not work for under fives because they don't reflect in that way. This time out is for you, giving you a chance to reflect. You are the adult; problems arise because of the way two people react to each other and you have a part to play in the drama.

Find Out

Many boys prefer to learn by doing. If he looks out on a winter's day and sees the sun, he may say 'I don't want to wear a coat today.' Rather than trigger a disagreement, let him go out without it (but take it with you) – he will ask you for it before he gets to the gate. If he can't get hurt, let him find out for himself.

Fits the Crime

A parent might say 'go to your room' because her boy doesn't put away his toys, but there is no link between his toys and going to his room. He probably won't think about it when he is in his room, so where possible make sure that the punishment fits the crime (if he doesn't put his toys away then he doesn't get to play with them).



Later when calm

When the level of tension is low is the best time to deal with situations. As parents we usually want to explain what our children did wrong at the time. Even if your son is able to reflect, he probably won't be able to at a time when both of you are upset. Wait until later, when you are close and cuddling to discuss it calmly and quietly.

More gears

Boys often push the boundaries until they are stopped. They stop when someone shouts, but if parents have more gears than ask and shout, boys notice the subtle changes in each gear and then parents find they only need to get to gear three or four before he does what he is asked. Practice using the techniques above in order such as:

1. Ask;
2. Ask again;
3. Ask and touch;
4. Ask, but low and slow;
5. Ask (low and slow) and also a bit firmer and direct;
6. The same as above, but with a follow through (fits the crime above) and finally
7. Follow through with the consequence.



What is it about boys?

These techniques work because they are based on what boys do and why they do it. Here are 18 reasons why the techniques work.

Girls talk, boys walk

Boys usually walk before girl and girls usually talk before boys. This means that girls ask adults about the world. A little girl might look at a climbing frame and ask 'If I climb up there and fall off will I get hurt?' A boy is more likely to want to find out for himself, climbing, falling off and crying 'I hurt myself' even if he has already been told what will happen.



Boys learn by action; they take risks

When boys are finding out they take more risks. As soon as they can walk some want to go off and find out how the plug socket works, how bouncy the sofa is, what you can see from the top of a ladder. The way boys play and explore worries parents who spend more time asking boys to stop and get down than they do with girls.

We shout more at boys

We talk to girls when we want to discipline them and are much more likely to shout when we discipline boys. Many parents think that boys need firmer discipline and therefore don't see shouting as a problem.



Firm, but not too firm

This doesn't mean that being strict involves threats or even menace, but means being firm (and if possible calm). For some parents this comes naturally, while for others they have to learn and practice. However, if a toddler is disciplined too firmly (hitting and a lot of shouting) then this can slow down his development. While hitting and shouting may work for in the short term, most young boys 'harden' to this style and start to hit and shout to deal with problems they themselves come up against, or become more inward looking and lack confidence.

Learn by exploring

Boys explore, and parents find themselves trying to discipline boys from afar, which means speaking louder and sometimes shouting when they are some way away.

Learn by experimenting

Boys want to experiment; they want to take stuff apart, see how it works and do things repetitively. This can be annoying and often leads to conflict.

Learn by reacting

Boys learn about relationships by reacting. If you get annoyed, your son may do the same thing again, because he is trying to work out why you become annoyed. A girl is more likely to ask why you got annoyed while a boy will do it again, so he can watch your reaction and learn from it.

Boys see the world as a playground

Boys often see the classroom, supermarket, train, or bus as an opportunity to mess around. We think they should be aware that these places are not playgrounds, but boys don't or don't want to. If it isn't a playground we have to teach them that it isn't.



Boys need boundaries

While most girls can be talked to, encouraged and cajoled, most boys usually need very clear boundaries. Young men describe a good teacher as one who is firm, fun and fair. They don't mind how strict a teacher is, but want to know that if the teacher says 'these are the rules' then they stick to them. They are looking for firm and consistent boundaries.

Firm and consistent

When asked what makes a bad teacher young men often say that it is inconsistency and moodiness. This results in boys not knowing when or what will get the teacher annoyed, what the consequences will be and whether a threat made by a teacher will be followed through.



Parent or Friend

Some old-school parents will say 'children need to know who's boss,' while others say 'I think you need to negotiate with children, if you explain then they'll do what you ask.' Both of these approaches have their strengths, but they also have their weaknesses. There are times when explanations are right, but you need to be a parent when your boy needs it.

Parents being active and engaged

If you have an active boy, you will need to be active as well, even if it is taking him to places where he can run off his energy. Just like an active dog, if you keep him indoors he will eat your bed!

Parents need to be close

While some boys look to be independent as early as they can be (playing outdoors, walking to school, crossing roads), this does not mean that a parent cannot also be close. Too often parents either let go too quickly and too far, or not quickly enough and stay over-protective. If you get this balance right, then it is more likely that you can keep a close relationship with your son.



Parents loving

Boys may get to seven years old and not want to be kissed or cuddled by their mums in public. This should not be confused with not wanting to have loving parents. Being seen to be kissed and cuddled in public will have consequences for some boys; they want the cuddles, but indoors where they cannot be seen.

Parent teaching consequences

Boys need to learn that there are consequences to their actions. If they step out of line then firm and consistent discipline, coupled with punishment if required, will ensure that he understands that if he behaves badly something will happen. Only threaten a punishment if you can carry through the threat and you find that it works. The problem with threats is that as he gets older, the threats have to get bigger. Stopping him from doing what he likes, even making him do things he doesn't, has a place, but cannot be relied on as the only way to ensure that he stays within boundaries.

Parent expecting a lot

But not too much! If our expectations of him are too low he is likely to underachieve and not try his best. However, if we expect too much he is likely to resist and give up.

Not all discipline

Make sure that there is a lot more happening other than just discipline. If you only say 'NO' it will seriously damage your relationship with him. If discipline issues only make up a small amount of your overall contact then it will be more accepted and effective.

From early days

Remember, if boundaries and discipline are right from the early days, it will be easier to maintain them. Boundaries and discipline are much harder to introduce if you start when he is thirteen!



About Boys Course (ABC 0-5)

This booklet has been written to go with courses targeting mothers with sons. The course aims to provide mothers with an opportunity to sift fact from fiction (in terms of issues such as whether boys need a father and whether boys might over-identify with their mothers), as well as strategies for encouraging and supporting their sons and learning ways to deal with boundaries and behaviour.

The course also aims to increase mothers' understanding of their son's development and increase their confidence in dealing with their son's behaviour and development.



Further information

If you have liked the information in this booklet go to our website www.boysdevelopmentproject.org.uk for other publications.

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This booklet aims to give parents with a son under the age of five some practical ways to discipline him and provide him with effective boundaries.

There are two parts: the first part describes and shows seventeen practical techniques while the second part explains why they work.

Most parents want the best for their sons and to do this we may have to look critically at how we parent, try new methods and look for new ways of addressing old difficulties. This guide will help you do this.

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