



Guidance and Discipline for Skill Building Summary

Why Guidance and Discipline for Skill Building?

When your two-year-old cries in frustration because they did not get the snack they wanted or gets angry and throws a toy, these situations are opportunities to provide guidance and discipline for skill building.

Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Before you can get input from your child to understand (and help them understand) what they are feeling, you both need to be calm. Your child will not learn from the situation if you or they are upset.
 - Ask yourself if your child is hungry or tired. You could offer a snack or transition to a nap.
 - Check on how you are feeling. If you are angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed, take a “parenting time out” and take several deep breaths (it really does help) or sit quietly for a few minutes.
 - If basic needs like hunger or tiredness are not issues for your child, then take additional steps to help them calm down. This might involve offering a hug, helping them take deep breaths, or holding a blanket or stuffed animal.
- Two-year-olds are just beginning to understand their feelings, so they will need your support in figuring them out.
 - *“I noticed your face got really red and your forehead got all scrunched up when you threw the toy. Were you feeling angry?”*
 - *“I know it is almost snack time. I wonder if you are feeling hungry?”*
 - At the park, if they are hiding behind your legs, you could say, *“Are you feeling scared?”*
- When you are reflecting on your child’s feelings, you can think about unpacking a suitcase. Frequently, there are layers of feelings that need to be examined and understood versus just one.
- You want to look past the behavior to uncover the underlying feelings.
- There are no “bad” feelings. The feelings behind the behavior may be from an unmet need.

Tip The saying “Name it to tame it” really works! Two-year-olds are only beginning to learn about feelings. Notice and name feelings each chance a family member is showing an expression to offer plenty of practice. Ask, don’t tell. “*Dad, you look sad. Is that right?*” Being able to identify feelings is the first step to successfully managing feelings. Post this chart on your refrigerator as a helpful reminder to you and your child.

Trap Avoid reacting with punishment to control behavior. This will require your own self-management skills. Be sure to pause and breathe before reacting when your child acts inappropriately so that you have the time and the mental resources to consider your next step. Punishment does not teach, may make the underlying feelings worse or introduce new negative underlying feelings, and may harm your relationship with your child.

Step 2. Teach New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- The fundamental purpose of guidance and discipline for skill building is to grow new skills and behaviors to replace inappropriate ones.
- Learning how to understand your own feelings and behaviors when your child acts inappropriately is a great way to start.
 - “Do I get angry when they act a certain way?”
 - “How do I respond to my anger?”
 - “How do I want my child to respond when they feel angry?”

Tip Children learn first through modeling. If you respond to anger by yelling, they will learn to respond to anger with yelling. Consider your reactions to anger. Formulate your new reaction around what you want your child to mimic when they are angry.

Trap It can be easy for parents or those in a parenting role to immediately respond to their child’s big feelings with a simple “No” or other short answer. For example:

- When a child is excited, instead of saying, “*Calm down,*” shift to “*Let’s go outside and run.*”
- When a child is angry, instead of saying, “*You shouldn’t be mad,*” shift to “*I see you are angry; what can we do to feel better? Let’s try taking deep breaths.*”
- When a child is frustrated, instead of saying, “*Here, let me do it,*” shift to “*This can be hard. Do you want some help?*”

- Teach your child positive behaviors. Each time your child acts inappropriately, ask yourself what positive behavior you need to teach and practice that can replace the inappropriate behavior.
- Play the “feel better” game. At a calm time, ask “*What helps you feel better when you’re sad, mad, or hurt?*” Share ideas like taking deep breaths, getting a drink of water, taking a walk, or asking for a hug.

- Teach positive ways to ask for attention. Would you like your child to say a polite “Excuse me” when they need you and you’re engaged in a conversation? If so, practice as a family.
- Model assertive communication through I-messages: “*I feel* (insert feeling word) *when you* (name the words or actions that upset you) *because* (state the impact).” Here’s an example: “*I feel sad when you throw your toy because someone might get hurt.*”
- Begin to teach your child to repair harm. A two-year-old will not be able to repair harm on their own, but you can help them by checking in with someone they may have harmed and asking if they are OK.
- End the day with love. Assure them that you love them no matter what they do or how they act.

Tip Create a ritual of sharing words of love and care at bedtime. Consider that ending the day reflecting on how much you appreciate one another could just be the best way to send your child off to sleep.

Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Accept feelings (even ones you don’t like!): “*Are you upset? Would your blanket help you feel better?*” Then, focus on teaching and practicing a positive behavior.
- Use “Show me...” statements like “*Show me how you can ask for attention.*”
- Offer two real choices. Particularly for a child who is seeking independence, offering them a choice, even if small like “*Do you want to put away your bowl or cup?*” can return a sense of control to their lives.
- As your child is exerting effort to seek independence, ask them for help. For example, they could help you fold some laundry or sweep the porch.
- Practice deep breathing.
 - *Blowing Out Birthday Candles Breathing.* You can pretend you are blowing out candles on a birthday cake. Just the image in your head of a birthday cake brings about happy thoughts. And in order to blow out a number of small flames, you have to take in deep breaths.
 - *Teddy Bear Belly Breathing.* Balance a teddy bear on your child’s tummy and give it a ride with the rising and falling of their breath. This would be ideal to practice during your bedtime routine when you are lying down and wanting to calm down for the evening.
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child has caused harm, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support in following through to repair it.
- Include reflections on the day in your bedtime routine: “*What did you like about today?*” or “*What were you most proud of?*” or “*What are you looking forward to tomorrow?*”

Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Ask key questions to support their skills: *"You are going to daycare today. Do you remember what you can do if you feel angry or sad?"*
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present new opportunities and challenges and along with them, stress, frustrations, and anger.
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different coping strategies can help offer additional support and motivation for your child.
- Apply logical consequences when needed.
 - First, get your own emotions in check. For example, if your child throws a toy in anger, take some deep breaths and avoid getting angry yourself.
 - Second, invite your child into a discussion about the expectations established in Step 2 about this behavior. Following the same example, ask your child if they remember better ways to handle their anger -- like deep breathing or asking for their blanket.
 - Third, if they repeat the inappropriate behavior, then apply a logical consequence as a teachable moment. For example, you might take away the toy that they keep throwing. Remember, the goal is not to punish the child, but rather to have a logical consequence like "I can't play with a toy if I throw it and possibly break it or hurt someone else."

Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Recognize and call out when it is going well: *"I noticed when you got upset, you told me about it, and we took some deep breaths together. Yes! Excellent."*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Guidance and Discipline for Skill Building Summary. Age 2*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.