Best Discipline Strategies for ADHD Children



From *ADDitude*'s Experts

LIVING WELL WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT
ADDITUDE

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A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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50 Smart Discipline Tips for Your ADHD Child

By *ADDitude*'s Experts

You've told your child to pick up his dirty clothes from the bedroom floor. Not a single sock has been put in the hamper. Did he not hear you—or did he ignore you? Annoyed, you shout and, worse, feel yourself getting angry and nearing a power struggle. Then come the threats—no TV for a week, no friends visiting for a month, and whatever else you can think of in your fury.

The incident costs everyone dearly: Your child feels angry and demoralized, and you feel like anything but a loving parent. And for what? A pile of clothes in need of a washing machine.

All parents want their children to be happy and well adjusted. But parents also want them to be respectful and obedient. Of course, kids—particularly children with ADHD—have their own ideas. Rather than do what's asked of them, children with ADHD ignore their homework, torment their siblings, and forget to feed the dog. They leave wet towels on the bathroom floor and dump Lego in the living room. They talk back, whine, sulk, or otherwise misbehave. Each day brings fresh chaos—and occasions for a parent's discipline.

Parenting experts have devised all manner of discipline techniques. Here you will find 50 of the best.

1. Figure out a better way.
Turn discipline moments into learning opportunities. Remind your child that we all make mistakes, then invite him to brainstorm better ways to deal with a similar temptation or stress in the future. Listen to his ideas and value his input. It shouldn't just be your way or the highway.

2. Discuss why it's wrong.
Make sure your child understands how his action—or inaction—has hurt someone or goes against the grain of your expectation. Then ask him if he thinks it would be a good idea to apologize, suggesting that he would probably want the same courtesy extended to him if his feelings had been hurt.

3. Be reasonable when grounding your child.
If your child or teen abuses a privilege, remove the privilege—briefly. Depriving a teen access to the cell phone for a month because she exceeded the plan's calling minutes is overkill. She is your daughter after all, not a criminal. Withdrawing the privilege for a short time—and allowing your teen to earn it back by developing a credible game plan for not abusing the privilege next time—teaches the necessary lesson.

4. Try "counting"—a tip from *1-2-3 Magic*.
Each time your child does something he shouldn't, hold up one finger and quietly say, "That's one." If the behavior continues, raise two fingers and say, "That's two." If the child still ignores your request, raise three fingers and say, "That's three. Take five." The child then goes (or is escorted) to a five-minute time-out in his room.
If your child won't budge, remove yourself from the room: Take a brisk walk around the house, read a few pages of a book, lock yourself in the bathroom—but no talking to your child, even if he tries to follow you! That's it. You don't shout or cajole or explain. It's clear to your child that he has a choice: He can shape up at once or suffer a consequence.

Once the time-out is over, do not rehash the episode or lecture your child about it. It's over.

5. Fight the urge to "over-parent."
Parents often fall into a pattern of needless correction, supervision, or disciplinary commentary—things like "Tie your shoes!" or "Put on your coat!" or "Chew more slowly." Despite your good intentions, comments like these irritate and demean your child—and undermine her ability to take care of herself. There are times when staying out of problems is the best thing. Let the big, bad world teach the child what works and what doesn't.

6. Look for opportunities to offer praise.
"Good job on the spelling test, Amy!" or "You cleaned your room up beautifully! And I didn't even have to remind you. Wow!" or "You got ready for school so fast today!" Ideally, you should praise your child about four times more than you criticize her. Show, by your words and actions, that you believe your child can manage himself—and he probably will. Discipline should become less of a problem.

7. Say it a couple of ways.
Different kids respond to direction in different ways. When giving your child a task—such as putting her games away—state it two ways. Say, "I'd like you to stop leaving your games all over your room. You paid good money for them, and you want to take care of them, right?" Then state the same request in a positive way: "Please put your games away." Chances are, she will get the message.

8. Schedule pit stops.
Racecar drivers periodically pull their cars into the pit—to change tires, add fuel, and talk over race strategy with the pit crew. Do the same with your child when things get tense and you feel the urge to yell. Tell her you want to have a pit stop—a private conversation in a quiet area of the home where nobody will interrupt—or, better yet, at her favorite coffee place. Scheduling pit stops cuts off an ugly exchange that you will regret later.

9. Encourage a redo.
When your child screws up, patiently reenact the situation—doing it the right way. If your child spills a glass of soda while clowning around at the table, have her wipe up the mess and pour another glass. Then ask her to place the glass in a better location on the table and be on her best behavior.

10. Take a moment.
Count to 10 before opening your mouth; it will short-circuit a great deal of verbal nastiness.

11. Strengthen the bond.
The best discipline combines a firm expectation of how to behave or act, along with basic respect for the worth and dignity of your child. Bedtime tuck-ins, listening to her concerns, empathizing with her feelings, and defending your child when necessary all show that you are more than a drill sergeant. You're a loving parent.

12. Reaffirm your love.
Always tell your child, no matter what she's done, how much you love her. Love and leadership are the twin functions of effective parenting—so make it clear that disciplining her doesn't diminish your affection for her.

13. Use routine to short-circuit power struggles.
Sometimes parents and kids get into a pattern in which daily tasks and responsibilities turn into battles. In most cases, the child eventually complies, but the conflict leaves everyone upset and emotionally burnt out. Set up routines to help children get through daily tasks associated with schoolwork and family life. For example, parents must establish and enforce—calmly but firmly—regular study times for each child. It may take weeks until the child accepts these routines and follows them consistently.

14. Impose consequences right away.
Whether it's withholding television privileges, refus-

ing to let your child attend a party, or something else, consequences work best when they are imposed as soon as possible following an infraction of the rules. The severity of consequences should fit the crime. Overly harsh consequences will encourage your child to resent the rules and your authority—and generate more anger and rebelliousness.

15. Deal with dishonesty. For children with ADHD, lying is often a coping mechanism. A lie may be a way to cover up forgetfulness, to avoid criticism or punishment, or to avoid dealing with feelings of guilt and shame over repeated failures. The first step in dealing with chronic dishonesty is to find the reasons that underlie it. If your child lies to avoid consequences for irresponsible behavior, you must monitor those behaviors more closely and discipline any act of deception. If he lies in order to cover up failure and shame, encourage your child to be honest—and provide appropriate help so that your child can overcome whatever he's struggling with.

16. Get your child to take you seriously. There could be any number of reasons why a child fails to respect you or your rules. Are the rules clear? Important rules need to be put in writing. Does the child refuse to accept the rules because she considers them unfair? In that case, the child's objections, and the parent's reasons, warrant further discussion. Ultimately, if you want your rules to be followed, enforce them consistently. That means not "forgetting" about them or occasionally suspending them because you feel guilty or because your child (or spouse) pressures you to do so. If you make empty threats, you're sacrificing your credibility and undermining your authority as a parent.

17. Disciplining an overreactive child. Although most children may protest a bit about being disciplined, kids with ADHD may react with intense indignation and anger. Keep in mind that chronic overreaction to discipline—particularly when intense feelings of anger or frustration is involved—may not be the result of ADHD. Is the child overreacting because she feels criticized? Unloved? Inadequate? Helpless? Overwhelmed? Are your expectations unrealistically high? In some cases chronic anger may indicate childhood depression or bipolar disorder.

18. Does your child tune you out? Do a self-check. Have you become too negative or critical toward your child? Do you focus too much on problems and not enough on solutions? Has conversation turned into a series of lectures, instead of give-and-take? No matter what your child's age, it can be helpful to involve him in the process of establishing the household rules and setting consequences for breaking them. A child who feels included in the making of family rules will be more likely to respect them.



19. Say no, in a calm, matter-of-fact tone. When a child wants a second ice cream cone and keeps whining, don't say, "Why do you always have to whine?" You tell your child that you are weak and vulnerable. To the child, it seems that there is a chance of getting what he wants if he pushes. Kids hear "No" and "Maybe" at the same time. Instead, parents of ADHD children should say no in an unemotional, flat tone. Say, "It's not happening." No lecture, no explanation. This tells your child, "You can count on me, because I don't change my mind. You can ask 7,000 times and the answer will still be no."

20. Put out the emotional fire. What happens if your calm "no" sets off a meltdown? Whining didn't work, so now it's time to embarrass you at the burger place with a full-blown temper tantrum. Take this opportunity to remind your child that he doesn't get to choose your reactions. You do. Even though you feel embarrassed, frustrated, and resentful, you are not going to match the child's screaming with your own. Yelling will escalate the confrontation. Instead, assume a calm posture. Sit down, cross your legs. Color with crayons and ask your child to help. Pull your child into an activity with you. Being calm says that you are in control of the situation — not him.

21. Use the same basic sentence structure when issuing a command. For example, "Justin, you need to turn off the television" or "Justin, you need to put your shoes in your closet." When parents do this consistently, the child soon realizes that anytime he hears his name followed by "you need to," he must comply. If he does, he earns one point toward some reward. If the child doesn't comply, he faces a negative

consequence. Typically, this is a time-out, or, for older kids, the loss of privileges.

22. Make sure the time-out is appropriate. No more than 60 seconds for each year of the child's age—for example, five minutes for a five-year-old. Often, 30 seconds for each year makes better sense. The important thing is not how long the time-out lasts—it's showing the child that you, the parent, are in control and that you can interrupt the inappropriate behavior and gain compliance.

23. Find ways to limit having to discipline a child. So-called inappropriate behavior isn't always inappropriate; it's inappropriate for a particular time and place. Children need to express themselves, and parents need to make it possible for them to do so. If your child needs to roughhouse, for example, you might keep a punching bag in a certain room. If your child enjoys dismantling appliances, it probably won't work to tell him not to. Instead, give him a box of old vacuum cleaners or toasters, and designate a room or space where he can take them apart.

24. Dealing with yelling and cursing. Sit down with a child during a calm time and say, "I know a lot of things are going to upset you, but right now you're doing things that can't be done in the house. So let's figure out things you can do when you're mad." Well, maybe some name-calling is acceptable. All kids get angry with their parents, and ADHD kids are more prone to anger and frustration than other children. So it makes no sense to tell your child not to get angry with you. Instead, help him find acceptable ways to express anger.

25. Negotiate incentives with your child. Children with ADHD are slow to learn how to tailor their words and actions to their environment. One good way to provide help is through a program of incentives or rewards. For every hour that a child doesn't call people bad names, he earned points toward a reward. Parents can sit down with their child and make up reward coupons. The coupons are for something the child loves to do—stay up late on a weekend night, eat pizza, earn $5. The point is to motivate the child to learn self-control.

26. Give your child concrete jobs to do. Instead of telling your child to stop misbehaving, tell him what to do. Giving him a specific job, and an opportunity to be helpful, alleviates his anxiety. If you're in a fast food restaurant, say, "Billy, do me a favor and save us a table by a window." "Sally, could you get seven packets of ketchup, eight napkins, and four straws?" Then give praise for a job well done. ADHD kids like to help. Enlist them.

27. Start discipline early. The longer you wait, the more the child has to unlearn. Provide consistent boundaries as early as possible. If you wait until adolescence, the challenge will be much greater.

28. How to work with teens who lose things. Teens and middle-schoolers lose items like wallets, keys, books, glasses, and papers. These mishaps lead to panic and guilt, which can make the teen defensive. The more a parent blames a teen for not caring about his things, the less likely he is to listen to parental advice. To avoid this chain of events, wait until things are calm and friendly, and offer suggestions in a non-accusatory manner. Say, "I know you have trouble finding things. That must be frustrating. I have a few ideas that might help, if you would like to try them." Suggest organizing the things he loses most often. Hammer a nail in the wall, or buy a fancy key holder, so he can practice putting his keys there every time he comes home.

29. Give your child a choice, not a threat. Choices give your child an opportunity to solve his own problem. Threats create a fight-or-flight response that leads to withdrawal or a heated argument. Have you ever heard your teen say, "So what? I couldn't care less!" when you threaten him? A threat includes punishment as one of the choices. "Clean your room, or you can't use the car. The choice is yours." A better way to say this is, "You need to clean your room. You can do it now or after dinner."

30. Shift his attention away from his wants. Have you noticed how intense we get when we're focused on the negative? Instead, shift the energy of the conversation toward solving a problem. If your child moans about not being able to have another cookie at the bakery, shift his attention away from his desire. "What about we make a big batch of cookies at home tomorrow? Do you think you guys could get your homework done tomorrow in time to bake chocolate chip cookies? Who wants to stir the mix and lick the spoon?"

31. Test different discipline approaches. Walk the line between being too strict and too lenient. Use problem-solving and negotiation to give your child input and responsibility. Try a strategy, evaluate, and redesign as needed.

32. Don't talk too much. Let emotions calm down before speaking with your teen. Always listen more than you speak.

33. Communicate with your partner or spouse. Parents should be on the same discipline page, and each should support the other. This stops the teen pitting parents against each other.

34. Plan ahead. Know which issues matter most and are non-negotiable. Discuss them and your expectations—and have preset consequences.

35. "I'll think about it." If your child says he has to buy a toy right after school, these four little words move the discussion from the



"have to have an answer right away" mode.

36. Ignore minor issues.
Homes become combat zones when parents complain to their child about everything.

37. Don't beat a dead horse.
If your ADHD child has already paid for his misdeed or screw-up (lost his new digital camera, say) or has been disciplined by a teacher, the police, ask yourself, "Is another consequence needed, or am I ticked off and out for vengeance?"

38. Don't take arguments personally.
Ignore your child's "you don't trust me" protests. Monitoring is a parent's job. Expect flak—and don't take it to heart.

39. Show your love.
When your child walks through the door, do you bark or smile? Discipline him or show your affection? Let your eyes fill with light, and make your words loving. Put problems on the back burner.

40. Don't ask, tell.
Don't start your requests with "Would you mind?" or finish them with "OK?" Instead, give clean and succinct like "Please pick up your coat from the floor." If your child doesn't respond to your first request, try saying it another way. Kids respond differently to requests, so saying things in different ways may lead to a better response from your ADHD child than repeating the request again and again.

41. Insist on eye contact.
When you look at each other eye-to-eye, your child can't ignore you and will listen to what you're saying. Ask your ADHD to child look at you when you explain why a certain behavior is bad or when you are requesting a change in behavior, like waiting patiently or cleaning up a mess.

42. Spend unstructured time together.
Just 15 minutes a day with your child lays the groundwork for a strong bond with your ADHD child. The closer you are, the more likely he will listen to you the next time he misbehaves.

43. Let your children know who's boss.
Explain to your ADHD child that playing video games and watching TV are privileges you've given her, not her right. Kids need to know that access to the phone, TV, and computer has to be earned by showing positive behavior and a good attitude.

44. Explain consequences for misbehavior ahead of time.
Having a clear plan of action before an incident occurs will help guide you when bad behavior happens and won't surprise your child. These consequences should involve taking away privileges. Really bad behavior, like hitting, should result in an extended time-out.

45. Stick to the consequences, no matter what.
Discuss the behavior and make sure your child understands why it was wrong. A parent has to be 100 percent consistent in addressing bad behavior. Otherwise, the behavior may persist or even get worse.

46. Make rules you can enforce.
Never fight a battle you can't win, and never set a rule you can't enforce. "Be home by 10 o'clock" is an enforceable rule. "Don't spend time with your friend Sandy, who tends to get you in trouble" is not. You can't tag along with your daughter and choose whom she sees when she leaves the house.

47. Stay in the present.
Nothing is more counterproductive when disciplining your child than bringing up past problems or mistakes while trying to deal with a current situation. Rehashing the past distracts from the problem at hand, and leads to an escalation of frustration and hostilities. Save the long lectures and the "I told you so."

48. Let your teen vent.
Your teen's frustration, disappointment, or resentment can quickly turn into anger. Acknowledge angry feelings, but don't criticize them as long as they are expressed responsibly — verbally, without becoming abusive (no name calling or insults). Make it clear that there is a big difference between angry feelings and angry acts. Set firm limits against physical anger toward people or property. If those limits are not respected, be prepared to call the police, if necessary. Some lines cannot be crossed.

49. Calm her down before she misbehaves.
If your child starts to act up at a fast-food restaurant or the mall, get her to calm down by asking her to imagine that there is a candle painted on her palm. Then have her hold her hand with her palm facing toward her face, and ask her to blow out the imaginary flame. Deep breathing settles out-of-control children. An alternative: Keep a balloon or two in your purse and ask her to blow one up.

50. Agree on a plan.
Before going to the grocery store or the video-game parlor, ask your ADHD child what would calm him down if he gets upset. If he does have an episode, you will have a plan because your child has delivered it to you. His ownership of it should pretty much guarantee that he will cooperate with your enforcing it.

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