



Parenting Young Children: *Practical Ways to Reduce Power Struggles, Increase Cooperation and Build Connection*

Parenting young children can feel challenging. Their emotions are big, their independence is growing, and their “thinking brain” is still developing. The good news? A few small shifts in how we respond can make daily routines calmer and help children learn important life skills. Here are some simple, effective strategies to support your young child while strengthening your connection.



1. Start by Adjusting Your Expectations

Before setting expectations for your child, pause and ask yourself:

“Is this realistic for my child *at this moment*?”

Young children’s abilities vary depending on many things:

- Sleep
- Hunger
- Mood
- Stress
- Time of day

For example, you might expect your child to get dressed or put on shoes independently. Some mornings they may be able to do it easily. Other mornings, they may struggle. If the same expectation causes a power struggle every day, consider changing it.

Instead of insisting, try:

- Offering help
- Turning it into a shared activity
- Letting it go for now

Children will eventually learn these skills. What matters most in the moment is protecting your relationship and avoiding unnecessary battles.

Remember: You control the expectation.

2. Ignore the Behavior, Not the Child

Sometimes children act out to get attention.

For example:

- Climbing on the table
- Silly or disruptive behavior
- Testing limits

Instead of reacting with frustration, try this approach:

1. Stay calm
2. Approach your child
3. Gently redirect

Example:

“I’m going to help you down now.
Let’s read a book together.”

You are:

- Not feeding the behavior
- Not escalating the situation
- Offering connection and a new activity

This helps children learn without turning the moment into a dramatic struggle. And remember, children learn best when they feel safe.



3. Use Specific, Enthusiastic Praise

Praise is powerful when it is specific, meaningful and enthusiastic. (Research tells us that when we praise enthusiastically, the child is likely to repeat the desired behavior sooner.) Children are built to seek our attention. They give us more of whatever behaviors we give attention to, even if it is negative attention. When we make the shift to bringing attention to the *opposite* of misbehavior, we get more of the desired behavior.

Instead of general praise like:

- “Good job!”

Try describing exactly what you noticed.

Examples:

- “You put your shoes on all by yourself. That was really grown up!”
- “You checked on your sister when she was upset. That was very kind.”
- “You helped set the table. That made my job so much easier!.”

This helps children:

- Understand what they did well
- Feel proud of their efforts
- Learn family values like kindness, responsibility, and cooperation.

4. Lead with Calm Confidence

Children feel safer when parents are confident and clear. If you seem unsure or hesitant when setting limits, children may feel uncertain too.

Instead, try to communicate calmly and confidently:

- Be clear about expectations
- Stay steady with boundaries
- Speak with confidence

Your child feels reassured when they sense: *“My parent is in charge and helping guide me.”* This helps them relax into the structure you provide.

5. Avoid Harsh Discipline

Harsh scolding, shaming, or long lectures may frighten children into compliance at the moment, but don’t lead to lasting behavior change. Instead, they can make children feel:

- Scared
- Angry
- Overwhelmed

When children feel overwhelmed, their emotional brain takes over, and they are less able to learn.

A calmer approach helps children return to their thinking brain, where learning can happen.

A calm approach also does the important work of helping children feel positively connected to you which is the foundation of cooperation.



6. Be Consistent and Trustworthy

Young children learn best when they know what to expect. Try to:

- Keep promises
- Follow through on what you say
- Respond consistently

Consistency builds trust and helps children feel secure.

7. Use Books and Stories to Teach Feelings

When children are calm, stories and books can help them understand emotions. Reading together can help children:

- Talk about feelings
- Recognize emotions
- Learn ways to cope

Stories create a safe way to explore emotions, talking about characters in the book, without putting pressure on the child.

Remember: Young children's brains are still developing. Their feeling brain often takes over their thinking brain. Your role as a parent is to help them:

- Calm their emotions
- Feel safe and understood
- Learn new skills when they are ready

Helpful tools include:

- Calm responses
- Predictable routines
- Specific, enthusiastic praise
- Opportunities for independence
- Strong connection with you

Final Thought

Parenting young children is hard work. There will be messy moments, emotional moments, and learning moments for both you and your child. But when you lead with calm, connection, and consistency, you are helping your child grow into a confident and emotionally healthy person. And remember, **you're doing an incredibly important job.**

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8. Encourage Independence in Small Ways

Young children love to feel helpful and capable. You can build independence by inviting them into everyday routines.

Examples:

- Setting the table
- Watering plants
- Helping cook
- Moving laundry from washer to dryer
- Cleaning up toys

These small tasks help children develop:

- Confidence
- Responsibility
- A sense of belonging in the family

And when they help? Celebrate their effort with praise.



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