

# A.C.T.

(Acknowledge, Connect, Teach) instead of React:

3 Simple Steps to Positive and Effective Discipline

## 1. Acknowledge

The first step in changing a child's behaviour is to be empathetic with what they are going through. To do that in a concrete way, we first **Acknowledge** what they are feeling.

Get eye level with them and ask how they are feeling or recognize what their real goal is or what it is they are wanting to do. With younger children, you can name the emotion for them.

“I see you are trying to get a reaction from the Sam. Are you wanting to play with him?”

“I see you are being rough with your friend. Are you feeling really frustrated?”

“I see you are upset that it is time to finish playing. Are you feeling sad/disappointed about having to stop?”

Listen to their response and then empathize with them. You can say things like, “that is hard”, “that is upsetting”, “that is sad” or “I’ve felt like that before too.”

Acknowledging children's emotions help them understand emotion and leads to better empathy and prosocial behaviours, especially in boys. Talking about emotions is also associated with more sharing and helping behaviours in toddlers.

When you start this conversation about emotions you are listening to their hearts. In response, they will feel like it is safe to express those emotions to you.

## 2. Connect

After you Acknowledge their feelings, it is time to connect with them and give their emotions a place to go. Connecting with children first, before correcting the behaviour or asking them to change the behaviour, will make it much more likely they will cooperate.

The key is to show them that you accept them, even when they have big emotions. You do not need to accept their behaviour, but we get to that in the third step. You do need to help them manage those big emotions.

You can connect through physical contact if the child seeks that. “It is hard to wait. I think it is hard to wait sometimes too.” (Here you are empathizing, normalizing the emotion, and physically connecting– “I’m here with you”).

“You are really frustrated. Would you like to stomp like a dinosaur? How about a hug?” (Here you are offering a physical way to release frustration and a physical connection).

“You are upset that we have to stop, would you like to go outside for a minute?” (Here you are diffusing their emotion through distraction and physical movement).

Often emotional connection and physical contact helps to de-escalate and relieve tension..

Connection alone will sometimes bring the child out of a tantrum. Already, through these two steps, you have heard your child and connected with them in their moment of emotional turmoil.

This is step two to helping them with their reactions. You have diffused their stress and brought them back to a more calm state (see the Anger Mountain diagram).

Acknowledge and Connect are often happening at the same time. As you acknowledge the child, you also give them an outlet for that emotion through you. You help them channel that emotion. You are a conduit to better executive function and as you do that, you are helping to strengthen those tenuous connections in their immature brain.

# 3. Teach

Now that the child has been acknowledged and is feeling connected to you, this is the time that you can teach them what they can do next time. This is why this method is effective — you give the child the tools to know what to do.

The original meaning of the word discipline comes from the Latin *disciplina*, meaning “teaching, learning” and is related to the word *disciple*. In order to change behaviour, especially long term, it is all about empowering the child to want to change and supporting them with learning the skill they need to do so.

When children feel empowered they will be internally motivated to change their behaviour instead of you externally controlling their behaviour through threats and fear (which, spoiler alert, doesn't work or prompt any long term change). Additionally, when a child is in a reactive state themselves (they have '*Flipped Their Lip*'), lecturing and trying to correct behaviour won't help either.

How children act out changes with age. From about the age of 18 months to 5 years, direct defiance decreases, but simple refusal and negotiation increase with age. 5-year-olds who used negotiation more often, as opposed to defiance or refusal, were less likely to develop psychological behaviour problems, like externalizing disorder.

Negotiation and reasoning — giving some choices, compromising while still setting limits, teaching while empowering, is both effective in the moment and is good for the child's overall development in the long-term.

## Teach through Negotiation:

“We need to stop now, we had so much fun! Have one last go and then we will tidy up. Next time I'll give you an extra warning so you know it's time to stop. What would you like to do next? Lego? Painting? Puzzles? (Adult led choice)

## Teach through Reasoning:

“What do you think would happen if we all hit each other every time we were cross? Everyone would feel sad and people would get hurt. Children would not want to come to Nursery any more. Maybe we need to think of a different way to show we are angry or disappointed.” (note WE not YOU – supportive language).

## Teach through Taking a Break:

“We cannot push and shove on the playground, even when we are frustrated. What can we do with our frustration? Can we stomp our feet? Wave our arms? Throw away our angry ball? Let’s take a break together over here until we feel better.”

Sometimes Acknowledge, Connect, and Teach will happen in quick succession. Let’s say a child is hitting another child. You walk over and take their hand to stop them hurting the other child (Connect) while at the same time you say “I can see you are angry,” (Acknowledge) followed by Teach, “It is okay to be angry and stomp like a dinosaur, but it is not okay to hit. Let’s go for a walk over here together.

Then go on to the next thing and hard as it might be, let go of that interaction. Recenter, find your breath and let it go. Children are often better at this than the adults! We linger on difficult interactions and can hold feelings for longer, sometimes taking things personally.

When you think about discipline proactively you’ll find that these moments become the foundation for the social and emotional tools that children will use for life. When you ACT instead of REacting you are helping them problem solve — you don’t have to change their behaviour for them or control them, you have to understand them and help them handle those big emotions.