



11. Teaching your child new skills

Sometimes a child doesn't know how to do something you want. Before you decide the child is being stubborn, you should make sure the child can really do it. Children with fewer skills have fewer options for dealing with any new situation. So they are less likely to succeed and more likely to have, or get into, trouble.

You should also check whether your expectations of the child are appropriate to the child's level of development. There are many things that young children don't know how to do yet, so you may need to consciously set out to teach them skills they lack. As well as skills like counting, table manners or doing household chores, you can teach social skills like taking turns, sharing, cooperating, solving disagreements, staying calm, or asking for help.

You need to choose a teachable moment for teaching your child a new skill, when your child is ready to learn. Children are not ready to learn when they are upset or in trouble or when you are upset or angry. Things are too fraught then. So wait until you and your child are calm - not just after misbehaviour - and concentrate on the good thing you want your child to do next time, not the bad thing they did last time.

Strategies for teaching new skills to children include **Modelling**, **Shaping**, and **Fading**.

Modelling is teaching by setting an example for the child to copy. It might be copying parents and other adults or children if you want your child to learn a skill that you, or an older child, already have. The teachable moment here might fit into everyday events – e.g.

- If you are teaching your child to eat with a knife and fork, you could say, “Look how I’m holding the food with the fork and cutting it with the knife. Now you do it like me.” Then praise the child’s efforts to copy how you did it.

Another way is to look for other children in the family or visiting friends who already perform that behaviour and give them praise and attention for doing it. This child can then be praised for imitating the behaviour of the other child – e.g.

- If you want Billy to use his knife and fork and Bobby is already doing it, you could say, “That’s good table manners, Bobby. You’re really using your knife and fork well.” Then, be on the lookout for Billy to try to use his knife and fork properly so you can praise his efforts too.

Shaping is a strategy to help your child learn new behaviours and skills. It means that you don't wait until your child does it perfectly. At first, you accept part of the behaviour and praise it, then gradually lift the standard until your child is able to perform all of the behaviour – e.g.,

- If you want your children to learn how to play together cooperatively without fighting, you first teach them to come to you instead of hitting, so you can sort it out. Then you gradually teach them problem solving skills ([See Tip 18 - Problem Solving](#)) and when

you are confident they have mastered this, you can say “Go away and sort it out amongst yourselves” if one of them comes in complaining about another one.

Shaping can be really useful if you are unsure whether your child is trying to do what you want, or refusing. This can happen if your child does only part of what you want, or starts to do it and then stops. You might choose to *wait* until the child has done what you asked. Or, you might choose to respond to the good part of what the child did, praise that, and encourage the child to finish the task – e.g.,

- If you ask your daughter to pick up all the toys and she picks up one or two and then stops, you can praise her for the toys that were picked up.
- If your son is running around instead of doing homework, and you say, “Sit down and do your homework”, and he sits down but doesn’t start the homework, you can praise him for sitting down and remind him about the homework.
- If you ask your daughter to put a toy away and she throws it roughly into place, praise her for putting it away, and ignore the disruption and the bad temper. Later you can work on “putting it away nicely” as the next step in doing as you ask.

Fading is a strategy to use with **Shaping**. When teaching a new skill or behaviour, at first you need to praise **every** time your child tries to perform the skill or do what you ask. As your child’s gets better, you **Fade** the praise. Instead of praising every time, praise sometimes, or move on to another behaviour to praise. **BUT** it is important to remember to praise **sometimes**. This keeps the good behaviour going and helps it to become a permanent part of your child’s behaviour – e.g.

- When your son is first learning to keep his temper, you praise the effort every time he tries to do the right thing, even if he gets upset. Then you praise staying calm every time he succeeds at it. Then, when you are confident of his self control, you praise it a few times a week. Eventually, you just praise it occasionally.

Remember to praise your children’s efforts to keep the good behaviour going.

Praise is an important part of all three skill teaching strategies, so praise each child’s efforts. If one child feels left out, that can cause resentment.