

# Babies learn limits when we keep them safe and secure

A new phase in life begins with the arrival of a baby. Schedules, interests, and family interactions all change with the addition of a new family member. After the initial joy and celebration, the family settles into a routine that focuses on the needs of the baby.

Soon your baby starts moving around and reaches for your steaming coffee cup, even though you've warned her that it is "hot!" She isn't being disobedient on purpose; she's driven by an inborn need to learn through hands-on exploration. The challenge for you is to keep your young explorer safe and yourself sane.

You start setting limits — which are the foundation of discipline. The word "discipline" comes from the Latin meaning "to teach". Discipline teaches a child how to act. When she is older she will learn how to correct her mistakes.

Scolding, slapping or isolating your child are forms of punishment. Punishment

**Lori McMechan**

## PARENTING POINTS

**Lori McMechan is a parenting group facilitator at the Elspeth Reid Family Resource Centre, a facility of Child and Family Services of Western Manitoba. » 255 Ninth St., Brandon » 726-6280**

only tells your child she is bad. It does not teach her what she should do instead. She starts feeling the world is unsafe and unpredictable. When she is older, she might think that when no one is watching she can get away with "bad" behaviour.

What kind of discipline is right for your child?

Small babies do not act badly on purpose. He is not trying to make you mad or control you by crying. Babies

who cry usually need something. He might be hungry, tired, wet, in pain, bored, or just need to be held. In the first six months, a baby cannot be spoiled. Babies who are picked up when they cry learn they are safe and can depend on the world. Usually they will cry less later on. As soon as he can talk, he will use words to tell you what he needs.

Crawlers and walkers need much more supervision because they move around now. Your baby does not understand what is safe and unsafe. Help him stay safe by making your home a safe place. It is not reasonable to expect a young child to stay away from electrical outlets, cleaning supplies, or breakable dishes just because you have told him "don't touch". A child this age does not remember instructions very long. If he touches it, he is not disobeying you to make you mad. He is curious. Yelling or slapping his hand may stop him temporarily, but he doesn't learn about what

is safe or unsafe. Instead, he learns to be afraid and to expect you to hurt him.

Here are some things you can do to make it easy for your baby to be good:

- Childproof your home. Childproofing helps prevent battles over things that are not appropriate for her age or are unsafe. Young children will put things in their mouths and are driven to explore and touch things.

- Be sympathetic and understanding, even when your baby engages in unacceptable behaviour. You might say, "I know you want the pretty cup, but the coffee is hot. Here is a pretty plastic cup you can play with." This example also demonstrates another important discipline technique, which is distraction.

- Tell or show your baby what she can do rather than telling her what she can't do. If she is squeezing the kitten, show her how to "touch the kitty gently — like this," as you take her hand and show her how to stroke. If this fails,

put the kitten in another room to save your child from a potential bite or scratch.

- Redirect your child's behaviour. If your baby is doing something dangerous, pick her up and move her to something safe. For example, take your baby away from the basement stairs; put her in the middle of the room and say, "You can crawl here."

- Ignore some behaviour, like spitting food. It is not harmful. Don't look, smile at, or scold your baby. Don't pay attention until she stops.

- Praise your baby when she does things you like. Infants like adult attention, such as words, hugs or smiles. The more positive you are when baby is good, the more she will tend to listen when you disapprove.

The key to good discipline is establishing a relationship that assures your baby that you are an important ally in the difficult task of growing up. When this relationship involves respect, love and pleasure, the foundation for effective discipline is in place.