



Bring Out the Best in Your Children

Helping shape your children's behavior is a key part of being a parent. It can be difficult as well as rewarding. While at times it can be challenging, a few key principles can help.



KEY CONCEPTS



- 1 **Model** behaviors you would like to see in your children.
- 2 Notice good behavior and **praise** it.
- 3 Understand where your children are **developmentally**.
- 4 Set **clear and realistic expectations** for your children that are developmentally appropriate.
- 5 Build **structure** and routines in your children's day.
- 6 Use **discipline strategies** to guide and teach instead of punish.
- 7 **Be calm and consistent**, when disciplining your children.
- 8 **Understand** that a child's negative behaviors have benefited them in some way in the past.
- 9 Use **repetition** to continually reinforce good behavior.
- 10 Be **prepared**—anticipate and plan for situations and your children's behavior.
- 11 Remain cool, calm, and collected.

- **Teach children to say how they feel.** If you are really frustrated, you might want to say, "You are driving me crazy right now." Instead, try to express your actual feelings: "Mommy is really frustrated right now." This teaches children to say what they feel instead of making critical or hurtful statements. Then help your children do this when they are upset. For example,

"It looks like you are feeling sad."

If your guess about how they are feeling is not accurate, allow your children to correct you.

BEHAVIOR + ATTENTION = MORE BEHAVIOR



If you are like most people, you'll leave your children alone if they are behaving well, but when your children are misbehaving, you'll direct your attention to them. This tends to backfire. The attention around the misbehavior actually increases the misbehavior as a way to get more attention from us!

The best way to improve behavior is to **give children a lot of attention when they are doing something you like and remove your attention when they are doing something you do not like.**

An easy way to increase good behaviors is by describing their behaviors and praising them when they make a real effort. For example,

"Good job listening the first time!"

"Good job using your inside voice."

It can be hard to get in the habit of doing this, but it gets easier and easier as you do it.

MODELING BEHAVIOR



Children learn by watching everyone around them, especially their parents. When you use manners and good coping strategies, you teach your children to do the same.

- **Point out sharing among adults.** Children often feel that they are the only ones who have to "use your manners," "share," and "take turns." So when adults share, point it out to your children. For example,

"Daddy is sharing his drink with Mommy. Good job sharing, Daddy!"

- **Model good ways to calm down.** Teach your children how to calm down when they are upset or frustrated. For example, if you are frustrated about sitting in traffic, you might say,

"Mommy is really frustrated right now. Please help me calm down by taking 10 deep breaths with me."

THE ATTENTION METER



When children get enough *positive attention* from you, they don't need to act out to get attention. Remember to fill your children up with plenty of love and affection throughout the day, every day. A very easy way to do this is to spend quality time with them. Playing with your

children for just 5 minutes will go a long way, especially right after getting home from work or after an errand. When playing with your children, let them pick the toy and lead the play. It's tempting to tell your children what to do or ask a lot of questions, but it is best not to do that. Try instead to just describe what your children are doing ("You are working so hard to build a tall tower" or "You *are* stacking those blocks") and give praise: "Great job sitting so still while we are playing."

Another way is to give attention to children for good behavior, yet not distract them while they are behaving, is to gently touch them in a loving way; for example, simply touch their shoulder or back. It is recommended you give children 50 to 100 brief loving touches every day.

You can decrease bad behaviors by ignoring them, but this only works if you are giving your children lots of attention for their good behaviors. The simplest way to do this is through planned ignoring. Ignoring means **not talking to, looking at, or touching** your children when they are behaving badly. The **key to ignoring** is making sure to give your children positive attention as soon as the bad behavior stops, like saying

"You are quiet now; it looks like you are ready to play."

It is important to not ignore unsafe behaviors that need immediate attention from you.

WHAT ABOUT TIME-OUT?

Another strategy is time-out—**time out from attention**, that is. Time-out is *not* meant to punish or socially isolate but instead to guide and teach children. The goal of time-out is to briefly remove children from a difficult situation to teach them how to self-calm. You can use time-out with children as young as 9 months for many things, from not listening to throwing or hitting. Use a very short 2- to 3-word statement to send your children to time-out, like,

"Time-out—throwing."

Using more words only brings more attention to your children, which is not the goal. Send or place your children in a safe location where you can see each other. This way, they can see that you are not upset and can

observe the fun they are missing. Young toddlers can be placed in a playpen or other safe location, and older children can sit on a chair or step. Time-out should be boring, so be sure to remove any toys from the location. Be sure that **no one talks to, looks at, or touches your children** during time-out.

Instead of having your children sit in time-out for a certain amount of time, invite them to come out of time-out when they have calmed their body. This is a great way to teach your children emotion regulation, an important skill. Allow them to get out of time-out when they have **quiet hands, quiet feet, and a quiet mouth**. Once your children shows all of these, give praise for calming down and invite them out of time-out by saying,

"Good job calming down; you can get out of time-out now."

There is no need to have a big talk with your children after using time-out; it will not help them, especially those who are very young.

MY CHILDREN WILL NOT STAY SITTING IN TIME-OUT! HELP!



A preschool-aged child can be expected to sit for time-out. If your children will not stay in time-out, try firmly and calmly walking or placing them back in the time-out chair or step. If your children still refuse to remain seated, try a "walking time-out," which basically involves planned ignoring. Once your children have calmed, praise them for calming and invite them to sit for their time-out by saying "Good job calming down; now you can sit for your time-out." If your children refuse, go back to ignoring. Once your children are calm, invite them again to sit for their time-out. The **key** to time-out is practice, practice, practice. It is best to practice it multiple times when your children are calm before using it. Practicing involves having your children sit at the desired location, showing quiet hands, quiet feet, and a quiet mouth, and then praising them. Make this practice fun and reward children by praising. Caregivers and other family members can also practice doing a time-out, modeling the correct behavior.

Time-out is not a punishment and should never be used in such a manner. It is important to remain calm and use a soft, low tone of voice. (Take a few deep breaths!) Children should not be left in time-out for extended periods. Once your children are calm, even if only for a split second, they should be praised for calming and allowed to come out of time-out. Repetition is one of the best ways for children to learn. Many psychologists say they would rather send a child to time-out 10 times, for 1 minute each time, than once for 10 minutes because it is through repetition that children learn.

GIVING YOUR CHILD INSTRUCTIONS



Misbehavior can sometimes be avoided by giving a child clear, simple instructions. Some ways to do this include:

- *Keep them short and to the point.*
- *Make them fit the developmental level of the child. Use the child's chronological age as a guide, the number of words used is the same as the age of the child. For a 2-year-old child we might say "Sit here."*
- *Use your manners, say please and thank you. (Role modeling)*
- *Never frame an instruction as a question—don't give your child a chance to opt out.*
- *Do give your child simple choices. For example, "It's time to get ready to go to the store. Would you like to wear your green coat or your yellow one?"*
- *Get your child's attention before giving instructions. Get down on their level, say their name, make eye contact, gently touch arm, and use a stronger voice so they notice a difference in your tone.*
- **MOST IMPORTANT:** *Praise your child for following instructions (or attempting to).*

MOTIVATING YOUR CHILD: REWARDS



Rewards are a good way to help children learn concepts or accomplish tasks. For example, a child who struggles to get ready on time might benefit from a reward system for getting ready on time. Rewards do not have to cost money; they can be as simple as spending quality time with you or choosing the movie on movie night. It is important to follow through with a reward.

SUCCESSFUL REWARD SYSTEMS:



- *Have **positive** goals. Example: "Getting ready on time" instead of "not being late."*
- *Are **simple** for the adult and child to follow; each goal deserves a reward. Focus on only 1 to 3 goals at a time. Otherwise it's too complicated for you and your child.*
- *Are **not always material**. A "reward" might be as simple as a pat on the back. Use material rewards sparingly.*
- ***Reward quickly**. Your child needs to have their reward almost immediately otherwise it isn't worth the wait.*
- ***Break down complicated tasks into its individual parts** and work on each part one at a time. For instance getting ready in the morning involves dressing, eating breakfast, packing their bag and getting in the car. **Gradually increase the stakes over time**, with more tasks needing completion to get the reward.*
- *Are **flexible**. What makes a child want to do something today may not be what motivates the same child tomorrow. Sometimes we need to change things that children are used to being able to have access to all day to something that is time limited and is a privilege or a reward. A good example of this is screen time, either with a video game, computer or TV.*

WHEN THINGS AREN'T GETTING BETTER



No matter how hard a parent or caregiver may try, there are times when the strategies described in this handout don't seem to work. There may be other things going on that need to be considered:

- *How has your child been sleeping? Like any person, a child who hasn't had enough sleep will likely not be able to behave, listen to directions, or function as they normally would. Enter the key word "sleep" on www.HealthyChildren.org to learn more about helping your children get the sleep they need.*
- *Do your children feel safe? Children need to feel safe. If something has happened in your children's lives that may result in a feeling of insecurity (eg, a violent event in the community, a parent leaving, a child moving to a new home), they may struggle with behavior. Returning to or establishing a routine can return your children to a sense of safety and control, helping behavior return to normal.*
- *Have your children had time with the people who they know love them? Having stable, nurturing relationships with people in their lives—especially parents—is very important for children's health and well-being. If those relationships have been disrupted for any reason, consider trying to strengthen them again and increase the time your children have with those people.*
- *Has something difficult happened recently? If so, your children may simply not be able to follow directions, stay focused, or control their emotions as well because of their bodies' response to the stress. The event could be something painful for your children. Just like a child would come for comfort and a bandage if she fell and skinned her knee, a child who has recently experienced something difficult needs to know that she can go to her parent or caregiver for the comfort she needs to heal and move forward. If your children continue to struggle, though, your family can seek the support of a counselor. Your children's pediatrician can help make that connection.*
- *How are you, as the parent or caregiver, doing in all of these areas? Parents need sleep, safety, and nurturing relationships as much as children. Similarly, traumatic events can have the same effect on adults in their ability to think clearly and control their emotions. Seeking support from family, friends, and health care professionals can be important for the health and well-being of parents and caregivers.*

CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT



The strategies described above can work for most children, but if a child has experienced a traumatic event, like the loss of a grandparent, a parent moving out, or a member of the household struggling with substance use, they may act differently. It may seem like they are "acting out." This is not about your children trying to misbehave to get attention. Their bodies are responding to the stress they have experienced. As a result, they are often unable to handle the normal pressures of life, like trying to do homework or go to school on time, as well as they might normally. This behavior is different than a normal tantrum and requires a different response. Rather than using discipline, the comfort and support that a parent or caregiver gives will help soothe children and reassure them that they are safe. This will allow their bodies to calm themselves, and their behavior will likely improve.

Please see the AAP Web site for the online version of this document as well as additional information at www.aap.org/traumaguide

The recommendations in this toolkit do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.

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