

Encouraging Good Behavior

by Jennifer D. Vroom, M. S., CCC-SLP



Helping children to modify behaviors at a young age fosters self-respect and respect for others. It also teaches them the importance of social rules and the consequences of their actions.

Here are some ways to prevent behaviors before they occur:

Reduce distractions: During structured activities, it is helpful to place toys out of the child's reach. Having items within the child's view may create problems. Hide toys you are not using by covering them with a cloth, curtain, other barrier, or putting them in a closet. Even if you can't hide all the toys, make sure you put away the "favorites" - those you know the child will focus on.

Use a schedule: Some children, especially those with a language delay, have difficulty understanding the concept of work before play. A schedule acts as a visual aid designating the work activities required before receiving a reward.

Hand over hand help: Not knowing how to communicate or even how to use a toy appropriately may lead to frustration, throwing, or other unwanted behaviors. Take the child's hand in yours and help him/her manipulate pieces while putting together a puzzle, stacking blocks, or turning pages in a book. In some cases, you may use this to help a child sign in order to make a request (e.g., more, help, finished).

Model appropriate play: Children learn by observing. Taking turns during play will allow you to demonstrate appropriate play, which the child may imitate.

Behavioral charts: Create a reward system to track the child's behavior throughout a session/day. For instance, as a child completes assigned activities, he/she receives a smiley face. If the child earns three smiley faces, he/she may play a game before continuing with work. It's also a good idea to focus on good behaviors versus negative ones.



Give choices: Children feel as if they have some control when they have choices. Choosing between two to three activities also provides a good opportunity to use language in order to request!

Rules: These should be simple, clear, and shared with the child ahead of time.

OK. You've tried these techniques and your child is still resorting to tantrums. What do you do?

Be firm: This may be hard for some of us. Kids can be cute even when they are misbehaving. However, it's important that children understand the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and an easy way to demonstrate this is through changes in our voice. Use a stern voice, without yelling, and say "No" when necessary. It may seem obvious to most of us, but if you are smiling at a child while saying no, you are giving that child mixed signals.

Be clear: If the child can understand conditional statements, tell him/her what will happen if the behavior continues. For example: "If you throw the blocks, we're going to have to put them away."

Be consistent: The key to making any positive behavioral change is CONSISTENCY! If we tell a child that we are going to put him/her in time-out, but don't follow through, we are not giving the child a good reason for stopping the behavior, and it will most likely continue. It may take a little time for the change to be evident, but keep in mind that we may be changing behaviors previously reinforced by ourselves or others. Communication between parents and professionals is also essential in maintaining consistency.

Withhold Contact: Kids will sometimes misbehave just for the attention they receive from adults. They often take cues from the verbal, emotional, and physical reactions of adults in determining whether they will continue or cease a behavior. It's important to make eye contact while verbally telling them no. But, during a tantrum, you may choose to "ignore" them as long as behaviors are not injurious to the child or to others. Giving them eye contact, physical contact (touching, hugging, tickling), or talking to the child is as good as a reward for some children once they demonstrate appropriate behaviors.

Time-out: Designate a chair, an area, or a room the child will stay in once the tantrum is over. Use timer for extra visual/audio cueing (as long as it's not serving as a reinforcement for the behavior you're trying to stop). If the child leaves the area, you may try adding to the time already allotted. Beware that some children may make a game out of this in order to gain attention.



Ideally, you want to find an approach which is not authoritarian, but rather encourages the child to independently problem solve. Every child is different, so certain techniques work better with some children than with others. If you think your child's behaviors are abnormal, self-injurious, or injurious to others, you should consult your physician or current therapist. In some cases, a Behavioral Interventionist may be helpful to develop an appropriate plan of action. It's also important to keep in mind that some children may have sensory issues, which can affect the way they react to their environment. Talk to your Speech Pathologist or consult an Occupational Therapist if this is a concern. You need to find what works for you and your child. Just remember to keep your cool and be consistent!