

Parenting Tool: Strategies for Managing Problem Behaviors

Positive discipline strategies work better than using punishment or negative strategies to reduce problem behaviors.

As any parent will tell you, children have different “temperaments” or ways that they respond to stress or frustration. For example, some kids are quick to react or have very intense reactions to frustration. Other children do not have the skills to help them cope with stressful or difficult situations. Almost all kids show problem behaviors at one time or another.

The strategies below may help your child learn better ways to cope with stress and frustration and reduce problem behavior.

Give your child positive one-on-one time

All children benefit from fun time alone with a parent or caregiver. During positive one-on-one time:

- Turn your cell phone off and don't answer the phone.
 - Spend time together – this means no cooking dinner or doing other tasks at the same time, unless you are doing these things together, and your child enjoys them.
 - Follow your child's lead when you are playing, hanging out or doing fun activities. Do not question, instruct or correct. See the “Child Directed Play” handout (seattlechildrens.org/pdf/Ce043.pdf) for more information.
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Give praise

When you see your child doing something positive, let them know! Especially if it is the opposite of a problem behavior you are trying to reduce. For example, praise playing nicely with siblings if teasing is a problem. Praise needs to be specific and immediate to work. Some examples are:

- “Wow, you are doing such a great job putting your toys away!”
- “Thank you so much for brushing your teeth without me asking you!”

When encouraging a new behavior, it is important to offer specific praise as much as possible, even if you are feeling frustrated with your child.

Ignore annoying (but not dangerous) behavior

Some behaviors can be ignored, such as whining, pleading, tantrums, eye rolling, attitude and complaining. Most children show these behaviors to get attention or get their way. If you can ignore the behavior, and it doesn't “work” to get attention or get their way, your child will eventually stop doing it.

Sometimes the behavior gets worse at first, as your child is still learning that you have changed what you respond to. But if you stick with ignoring the behavior it really will lessen or stop over time. Giving in could train your child to misbehave louder and longer to get attention or their way.

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To Learn More

- Inpatient Psychiatric Unit
206-987-2195
- Outpatient Psychiatry Program
206-987-2164
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.



Use rewards

Rewards are powerful tools to help your child learn new behaviors. Rewards are not the same as bribing. They are planned in advance and depend on your child showing the behavior you want to see. Bribing is when the child is already showing a behavior problem, and the parent attempts to get them to stop by offering a reward. Bribing does not work as well and may reinforce behavior problems.

Rewards work best when they are used soon after your child shows the behavior you want to see. Small, frequent rewards are usually better than a big reward that takes a long time to earn. A few examples of small rewards include, letting your child pick a treat for their lunch bag, the music in the car, or a special game or activity to do with you. Rewards also work best when they are new and only offered after your child shows the behavior you want. For example, if a child already gets to play video games for several hours per day, an extra 30 minutes probably will not be a useful reward.

Use consequences

Sometimes children don't respond to praise and positive discipline. In this case, you can use consequences. Consequences should be specific, related to the behavior problem and take place as soon as possible after the problem behavior. Some examples are:

- Time-out – this can be used with children up to about age 12. During a time-out your child is removed from the situation and does not get your attention. The last part is key – if you and your child continue to argue, or your child continues to get attention during the time out, it will not work.
- Taking away privileges (such as watching TV or playing video games) – this can work well for younger children and teenagers. Privileges should be taken away one at a time for a short period of time (for example, 4 hours for 1 day). Getting the privilege back, and wanting to hold onto it, is what changes your child's behavior.

Talk about feelings and validate

Children often act out because they are frustrated and have a hard time communicating this to their parents. Parents can use “emotion coaching” to help their child name the feeling. Then they use validation to tell their child that they understand and accept their thoughts or feelings. Validation doesn't mean you are agreeing with or like their behavior, but that you are listening and trying to understand their point of view. See our “Emotion Coaching” (seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1548.pdf) and “Validation” (seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1547.pdf) handouts for more information.