

## GUIDING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

By Lynn Arner-Cross and Sarah Neville-Morgan

Discipline is always a hot topic for parents. We parents are always looking for ways to discipline our children. But what is discipline? Discipline is fostering children's willingness to cooperate, share, and be gentle. We discipline children in order to help them learn to control impulses and accept limits. The goal is to help children develop inner self-control as well as the ability to make intelligent choices about staying within limits. In other words, discipline is teaching children how to behave socially. How do we teach our children to act in socially acceptable ways?

The first thing we need to consider when we are trying to help a child to manage his/her behavior is, why is the child behaving that way? Understanding why a child behaves the way s/he does helps us to determine how to react to that child and how we can support the child and meet his/her needs. In figuring out the "why" behind a child's behavior, we need to look at four factors:

1. **Developmental level:** Is the behavior developmentally appropriate?
2. **Child's Need:** What does the child want? To be in control? To be independent?
3. **Environment:** What is the context and what else is going on in the child's life?
4. **Lack of Knowledge:** Does the child know the rules? Does the child know his/her options?

### Techniques for Guiding Behavior

After considering the answers to the above questions, here are some techniques that you may find helpful:

- **Change the environment.** If something in the environment is causing or reinforcing the child's behavior this needs to be changed before the child's behavior can change (e.g. if someone in the environment is reacting in a way that encourages the child's behavior, the child will continue to act out).
- **Offer choices.** Children like to be in control and want to decide how they will go about doing something. They are more likely to comply if they get to make the choice.
- **"Be there" for tantrums.** Rather than feeding into tantrums with our own upset and embarrassment, we can let the child know we are nearby and will be there when they are finished.
- **State limits positively (focus on do's instead of don'ts).** Tell the child what you want him/her to do rather than what you do not want him/her to do. Save "no" for when a child is hurting or is doing something unsafe and needs to be stopped immediately.
- **Explain the reason for the limit.** When a child understands why a limit exists, he/she can apply that understanding to other situations and does not have to rely on an adult to tell him/her in every new situation.
- **Model appropriate behavior.** Children watch us and do what we do.
- **Offer acceptable alternatives.** When you stop a child and tell him/her to do something, you must suggest a behavior to replace the inappropriate behavior.
- **Accentuate the positive (appreciate and encourage).** Counter balance negative feedback with positive attention given to a child.
- **Share concerns firmly.** Sound like you mean what you are saying and state the limit simply and clearly.
- **Be consistent.** When limits are enforced sometimes and not other times, children need to test to see if the limits will be enforced this time.
- **Help children search for constructive solutions.** Facilitate a child's problem solving by asking questions or offering suggestions.
- **Use descriptive, not judgmental words.** When redirecting a child's behavior, describe the effect a child's behavior has rather than labeling the behavior as "bad" or "mean." The child can make better use of the description.
- **Use "I" messages** to let the child know what you are experiencing or needing; "When you \_\_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."

- **“Sports announce” rather than “referee.”** The sports announcer describes what is happening (he took the ball from her) rather than making a judgment about whether it was fair and determining the penalty (she had it first so you have to give it back to her).
- **Help children see connections** between what they do and how it affects others.
- **Avoid making children wait.**
- **Give children words to express strong emotions and reflect their feelings.** When children learn the labels for their emotions, they are able to verbally express those emotions to us rather than acting them out. (Saying “I am mad” rather than hitting.)
- **Redirect the child** to a more appropriate action. This gives the child positive practice with this more appropriate behavior. In the future, the child is more likely to repeat the positive behavior.

A common problem that adults run into is that we often focus on a child’s inappropriate behaviors to such an extent that the child is receiving a lot of negative feedback. Many parents get caught in a cycle of ignoring the acceptable and concentrating on the unacceptable. This can cause a child to feel more frustrated and can impact self-esteem. Instead, we need to be enthusiastic about the acceptable behavior in order to encourage the child to do these behaviors more.

Inappropriate behaviors should be ignored while unacceptable behaviors need to be consistently disciplined.

**When you do need to set a limit, follow the steps below:**

1. Observe the situation (to gather as much information as possible about what is happening).
2. State the limit as a firm decision.
3. Use simple, direct explanations about why the rule exists.
4. Reflect the child’s feelings (even when resistant or angry --- so the child knows you understand him/her).
5. Provide real/appropriate choices/options (so the child can replace the inappropriate behaviors).
6. Send the child back into the environment to try again (so they always receive the message that they can be successful).

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