

## **Basic Home Behavior Management**

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### **State the Rules**

All children need and want boundaries and limits. Rules exist even though they may not be spoken or written. Try to state your rules in positive terms – “Keep your hands and feet to yourself.” Have a few reasonable rules. Be consistent in using and enforcing rules. It is important to call attention to rules even when your child is following them. Don’t wait until your child has violated them.

❖ ***K.I.S.S. (Keep it Short and Simple)***

### **Make the World Predictable**

Develop routines and write out a daily schedule. Homework, TV, school, play, baths and meals should all be written down. Scheduling helps children (and adults) to gauge time, organize activities, and prioritize in terms of importance. Schedules provide a visual cue of when things will happen and imply an agreement of when it is time to stop one activity and move on to another. This decreases arguing. Reinforce adherence to the schedule. Use the calendar, lists, and timers to help structure time and activities. Timers help decrease parental nagging and reminding.

❖ ***Set the Stage for Success***

### **When Behavior is Appropriate, Praise it**

Focus on the many positive behaviors that your child exhibits. When you enter a room, ask yourself “What is going right?” Make specific, positive comments. For example, notice when your child responds to directions the first time you give them. Even if the child does it because it is something he wants to do, it still merits special attention. This will help your child to notice the exact behavior(s) that you want him to demonstrate. If a task has been partially completed, comment positively on the completed part first. When you notice things that a child does right, it breaks the cycle of negative redirection (nagging) and makes him feel better about himself and you. Increase the amount of nonverbal praise. Give lots of warm smiles, pats, and thumbs up. Your attention is something your child needs, use it at the right time. Provide extra praise for behaviors that you want to increase.

❖ ***Catch the child being good***

### **When Behavior is Inappropriate, ignore it**

For a child, negative attention is better than no attention at all. Attention reinforces behavior. Before you look at, speak to, or touch the child, ask yourself. “Do I want the behavior my child is not engaging in to increase?” If not, ignore it! Turn your attention to other matters or other children (siblings) who are behaving appropriately. If the behavior is not dangerous or destructive and you can ignore it, you should do so. When you refuse to give attention to undesirable behavior, a child must do something else to get your attention. Quickly give positive attention to more appropriate behaviors. Be aware that when you begin to ignore a problem behavior, it may increase rather than decrease at first. Be firm and consistent.

❖ ***If there is no audience, the show will close***

### **When Giving Directions, State Them Clearly**

Do not phrase directions as questions when you mean them as directions. For Example, don’t ask “Are you ready for bed when it is bedtime. Instead say, “John, it is time for bed.” Get the child’s attention, give the direction, and reinforce compliance. Some children need help stopping and shifting activities. Use timers and verbal reminders to structure transitions. “Five more minutes, then it is time to clean up.” Whenever possible, give a choice between two acceptable options, but your child should know when he has a choice and when he has no option. State expectations clearly. “Straighten up your bedroom” leaves room for debate.

❖ ***Say what you mean***

### **Never Give a Direction Unless you are Ready to Enforce it**

Reserve directions for important situations when you are prepared to follow through. If you don't feel like getting up to check, don't tell your child to put away his toys. When you are concerned about inconsistency, ask yourself exactly what message you want to convey. It is ok to leave the toys out or it is okay not to listen to your directions.

❖ *Mean what you say*

### **Focus on One or Two Behaviors and be Consistent**

Pick one or two behaviors to work on and respond consistently. This way your child will learn what to expect and, in turn, he will behave more consistently. Try to discuss specific behaviors with your spouse and agree on specific responses/consequences. A consensus improves consistency. Writing it down is helpful. Try to have others provide the same structure. This increases the rate of learning- there is less testing behavior and it decreases the likelihood that the new skill will be person specific.

❖ *Pick your battles to win the war*

### **Understand the Limitations of Punishment**

Punishment procedures, such as time-out, only interrupt behavior but do not teach an alternative behavior. If punishment procedure is used, be sure to deliver the punishment in a matter-of-fact manner, deliver it immediately, and every time the behavior occurs. Effective punishments entail a warning, have a set beginning, and a set end. Reinforce incompatible behaviors and positive alternative behaviors. In a pinch, ask the child what the punishment should be.

❖ *Teach them what to do as well as what not to do*

### **Ask a Question**

When all else fails and redirection is necessary, ask your child a question such as "What guideline applies to that situation." Reinforce his/her ability to repeat the rule. This is less judgmental, provides an opportunity for the child to be reinforced, and redirects a negative interaction into an exchange of information. Be calm. Try writing down the child's responses. Build on what was said. Encourage problem solving.

❖ *A Statement provokes a defense, a question evokes a response*

### **Model Appropriate Behavior**

Demonstrate the behaviors you want your child to display. Model the target behaviors then encourage your child to imitate you. Pretend to do it wrong and let the child correct you. It is easier to remember new behavior if there is a visual image and a chance for supervised, positive practice.

❖ *A picture is worth...*

## BASICS OF BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION/POSITIVE PARENTING

Hope Taylor Scott, MD

- 1) Read Susan Weiss's handout on Basis of Behavior Modification and Chapter 6 of the AAP's ADHD: What Every Parent Needs to Know. Even though ADHD is in the title, it is a very good and thorough description of behavioral techniques that work for (almost) every child.
- 2) Remember: Behavior that is paid attention to **increases** in frequency. Behavior that is ignored **decreases** in frequency (although it often gets worse for another 6-10 weeks before improving; this is called an Extinction Burst).
- 3) **Praise positive** behavior as often as possible. **Ignore inconsequential** behaviors. Immediately consequence dangerous behaviors (hitting, biting, slapping, kicking, pushing).
- 4) Make requests of your kids in **short positive phrases** that will help a child internalize the phrase as an action they can later visualize when needed. Preschool teachers are masters at this. Think "hands and feet to self" (instead of "don't hit" or "don't kick") or "inside voice please" (instead of "stop yelling"). This gives your child a positive goal to visualize and work towards.
- 5) Act, **don't yak**. The more emotional everyone is, the less you should say; never more than 25 words and the fewer the better. Just as a traffic cop doesn't lecture (or say much at all) when pulling you over for speeding, you simply give your child a consequence and let the consequence make the point for you. This way, your child is more likely to eventually make a direct association between their behavior and the consequence without getting you tangled up in the middle.
- 6) Tell a **tantruming** child "Wow, I see you are really upset. Let's talk about it when you can tell me calmly. I'll be right here folding laundry (doing dishes, etc) when you're ready," then go about your business without paying too much attention to the behavior. Do not try to reason with a tantruming child; this not only gets them more upset, but also feeds into the tantrum by paying attention to it. And above all, do not give them what they want, this just reinforces the behavior.
- 7) Kids really can get "Hangry." Tantrums that are completely nonsensical can be due to low blood sugar, especially in younger kids. Make sure they are eating protein and fats with their carbs, so blood sugar doesn't plummet 2 hours after meals and travel with small healthy snacks for emergencies.
- 8) Positive comments/rewards should outweigh negative consequences **at least 3:1** because rewards and recognition are more effective. Work hard to find lots of things to comment positively on. As Sharon Weiss likes to say, "In the absence of fire or water, you can always find something positive to say to any child."
- 9) Consequences are more effective when they are immediate, meaningful to the child, and predictable (i.e. consistent). It is better to deliver **short negative consequences** consistently than it is to give whopper consequences that you don't enforce because you are ambivalent.
- 10) Much of the work of effective parenting is done before we even open our mouths. When you are looking for cooperation from your child, start by asking yourself how important that cooperation is, remembering that no child complies 100% of the time. In fact, the average Kindergartener complies with 60% of parental requests. The trick is to phrase things so that it is clear which 60%

your child must comply with. Is this a Requirement (must be complied with or there will be a consequence) or is this a Request (optional, no consequence)? Then decide what kind of consequence there will be. This determines how you will phrase what you say to your child. A Requirement sounds like “Please pick your roller skates off of the stairs right now before Grandma breaks her neck.” You have stated the necessary action (Requirement) clearly and briefly. You have made clear when (now) and why (So Grandma doesn’t break her neck). If your child doesn’t comply in a reasonable time frame consistent with the word “now,” you will then say “OK, I am going to count. If the roller skates are not gone by the time I get to three, they will go into Toy Time Out for a week.” Then calmly count. If the skates are still there when you get to three, follow through: pick the roller skates up, put them away, and give them back in a week. Do not say anything, let the consequence speak for itself (see #5, above). If by “three” your child is grumbling and moaning and dragging their feet but is complying, great, consider this a win. A Request may sound like “Gee, it sure would make me happy if you put the forks on the table for dinner.” It is clear from this phrasing that there is wiggle room here. There is no time stated for compliance. A reason is given that may or may not motivate your child (sure would make me happy) but it isn’t required.

- 11) Before starting a system like this, make sure both/all parenting partners are on board as much as possible. Then call a family meeting and say “We are tired of yelling. You guys don’t like it, we don’t like it, and we all want to cooperate and be a happy family team. So, from now on we are going to ask you guys to do something just one time. If you do what we ask the first time we ask it, great, no yelling! If we have to ask a second time, there will be a consequence.” Then follow through as above. Expect your kids to be shocked at first. After all, most of us have taught our kids to pay no attention to us until we start yelling. We ask, we *ask*, we ASK, then we get mad and yell and *then* we consequence. The end result is that our kids learn that when we speak calmly nothing is going to happen, and they don’t have to worry about a consequence until the yelling has started. Then we wonder while we are yelling all the time.
- 12) Do not threaten consequences that you **cannot** follow through on. A good example is threatening a child who won’t get dressed when late for the school bus with a time out. If you are late for the bus, you don’t have time for a time out and you just issued an idle threat which you can’t follow through on, which teaches your child that you don’t mean what you say. Instead, just wordlessly grab the clothes and the kid, buckle them in the car and let them show up at the bus stop in their pajamas. Most likely they will get quickly dressed in the car, and if they don’t, and they have to go to school in PJs, it will only be the end of the world for them, not for you.
- 13) Do not threaten consequences that you **won’t** follow through on. This usually comes from extreme exhaustion or anger and looks something like this: “This place is a pigsty! If it’s not picked up by dinner, I am going to ground you for 6 months!” Now you’ve gotten yourself in a pickle.
- 14) Use the word “**cooperate**,” an active verb that accurately describes what you want (working together as a team towards a common goal) instead of “listen,” a passive verb that can be confusing. They can sit on the sofa watching TV and listen to you tell them to take out the trash and when you are mad that they didn’t do it, they will think “Gee, I was too listening! I was sitting right here listening the whole time she was talking!”

15) Consider creating a **Token Economy**; they are powerful tools. They give children a sense of control over their lives and reward good behavior in a way that can be turned into meaningful rewards. At the same time, since a token is more of a symbol that builds up towards a reward, it allows us to avoid creating a transactional system where kids will only cooperate if a cookie or iPad time or a TV show is immediately given. The rewards should be largely experiential (a sleepover, a trip to the park, taking the family to a movie of your choice, an extra book at Friday night bedtime, a date night with Mom or Dad (alternate between the two)) and usually not monetary or materialistic. A Token Economy is most effective when tokens are given frequently, and it benefits all involved when parents “catch them being good” as often as possible. Kids should be able to suggest rewards that are meaningful to them, and rewards should change fairly often to keep the program fresh. At a fairly young age kids should be given chores that they get tokens for as well, creating a sense of the family as a team early. As kids get older and start to earn privileges, tokens can be used towards their privileges. Read more about setting up a Token Economy here:

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/create-a-token-economy-system-to-improve-child-behavior-1094888>

16) Don't worry about your kids **embarrassing** you. Every parent has had a kid do something embarrassing. And when they are teenagers you can embarrass them back. If the bad behavior is a serious interruption to those around you, pick your child up and leave if at all possible; it's not fair to inflict childish behavior on others.