



Strategies for Managing Children's Behavior

Parents and other adult caregivers (such as extended family members, teachers, and domestic care providers) help model and teach children appropriate social behavior as they grow and develop, through various means such as providing examples, giving explanations, or giving feedback.

It is typical for most children to exhibit some inappropriate behavior during their development. In addition, it is not uncommon for some children, such as very young children and some children with medical conditions and/or developmental delays, to exhibit more frequent or severe inappropriate behavior as a form of expressing their frustrations or wants, as a way of attempting to get out of demands that they find difficult or unpleasant, and/or as a way of getting increased attention from their adult caregivers.

Some of these inappropriate behaviors may include: noncompliance (in the form of physical refusal), negative vocalizations (such as whining or screaming), disruption (such as throwing toys or other items), and even aggression (e.g., hitting, kicking) or self-injury (e.g., biting their own hand or head banging).

Based on the systematic, scientific investigation of learning and behavior, certain concepts and strategies have been found to be key in understanding and modifying such behavior, and in helping children learn more appropriate ways to interact with others over time.

The following recommendations are based on these key principles of learning, and can be instrumental in helping to manage and improve your child's behavior if practiced consistently by you and other adult caregivers interacting with your child. Recommendations are divided into three core areas: positive attention, planned ignoring, and increasing compliance with instructions. The effectiveness of these strategies can be enhanced when used together.

Positive Attention

One of the most important rules about human behavior is:

Behavior that is followed by positive consequences will increase in frequency.

This is known in behavioral terms as "reinforcement". For children, adult attention is very often the most highly desired consequence. Thus, providing positive attention following your child's appropriate behavior will serve to reinforce it (i.e., will increase the likelihood that your child will exhibit this behavior more often in the future).

Give positive attention to your child whenever there is an opportunity:

1. Observe what your child is doing throughout the day (even when your child is being quiet), in order to **notice as many opportunities to provide reinforcement as possible**.
2. **Note the specific behavior** that you want your child to increase (for example, following your instructions, waiting patiently, using manners, playing quietly, etc.).
3. Give positive attention **immediately** following the appropriate behavior.
4. To give the most **salient positive attention**, make eye contact with your child, speak enthusiastically, tell your child specifically what he or she did that pleased you, and express your pleasure with praise, a smile, or other signs of approval.
5. If there are specific behaviors that have been particularly difficult for your child (e.g., completing certain tasks), you may choose to provide extra, or special, positive consequences when your child completes them, such as **access to a special treat or activity**.
6. Children who have difficulty with speech and language skills may exhibit inappropriate behavior in order to communicate a need, desire or preference. Therefore, it is recommended that you pay special notice whenever your child communicates using words or other forms of appropriate communication (gesture, pointing, etc.) rather than inappropriate or disruptive acts.

Planned Ignoring

Another important and related rule about human behavior is:

Behavior that is not followed by positive or desired consequences will decrease in frequency.

Withholding attention, or planned ignoring, is an effective technique for reducing mild inappropriate behavior that a child may be exhibiting in order to get attention. This technique can be difficult at first for parents to implement, as it may be perceived that ignoring inappropriate behavior is "not doing anything" to change the behavior (e.g., in comparison with providing reprimands). However, for many children, any adult attention at all (even negative responses such as scolding) is reinforcing. Thus, they will benefit from learning clearly that their inappropriate behavior will be ignored, but that their appropriate behavior will result in getting the desired adult attention.

Provide attention for appropriate behavior (as noted above) and practice planned ignoring of inappropriate behavior when it occurs:

1. Ignoring means **not looking at** your child or giving any **nonverbal cues** (scowling or other facial expressions) during the inappropriate behavior. Break eye contact and keep your expression neutral.
2. Ignoring means **not talking to** your child about the behavior at all. Do not tell your child that you are ignoring him/her, and do not comment to others around you about the behavior.
3. **Ignoring** means **no physical contact** with your child during the inappropriate behavior.
4. While the inappropriate behavior is occurring, **continue to do whatever you were doing** before your child displayed the behavior. For instance, if you were giving a demand to your child, continue to give the demand despite whining or other inappropriate behavior.
5. As soon as the inappropriate behavior ceases, it is important to **redirect** your child back to the activity or conversation that was going on before the behavior occurred or to another activity or conversation.
6. Once your child engages in some other activity or appropriate behavior, **provide positive attention as noted above**.

*Special Considerations with Planned Ignoring

1. Be aware that when you stop giving attention to behavior that you previously gave attention to, your child's behavior may get worse before it improves. This is because they will try to get your attention with an inappropriate behavior that "used to work", and may "try even harder" when it doesn't. For instance, if your child used to whine to get your attention, he/she may scream when you do not respond for a period of time. This is a normal and expected behavioral phenomenon. After this initial "burst" of increased inappropriate behavior, it will decrease if planned ignoring continues to be implemented consistently.
2. Ignoring should be used with mild and non-dangerous inappropriate behavior (for example, whining). However, more severe or unsafe behavior (e.g., jumping on furniture, severe aggression) may still require some adult attention in the form of physical interruption or blocking.

Increasing Compliance with Instructions

Children often do not want to comply with demands that they find difficult, frustrating, or unpleasant. However, many of these demands are things that they need to learn to participate in (e.g., school tasks, life skills), and will benefit from. Additionally, when children become more compliant with overall adult demands and instructions, they will have more opportunities for positive reinforcement and interactions.

The following guidelines may help in giving effective instructions and in increasing compliance:

1. **Get your child's attention BEFORE issuing an instruction.** Do this by making direct eye contact with your child (you may need to bend your knees) and saying his/her name.
2. **Issue one instruction at a time.** It is helpful to break tasks down into small steps to obtain compliance. For example, if you want your child to complete his/her homework, first say "Please sit in your chair". Once your child has complied, then say "Open your math book". Provide verbal praise and positive attention to your child when he/she complies with your instruction.
3. **Be specific and clear.** Use short sentences and specific words to give instructions. For example, if you want your child to clean up his/her room say "Put your shoes in the closet" rather than "Put your things away".
4. **State commands as an instruction rather than a question if there is not a choice.** For example, avoid questions like "Are you ready to do your homework now?" because you have given your child the opportunity to say no; simply say "It is time to do your homework".
5. **Use "do" commands.** Compliance often increases when you tell your child what you want him/her to do versus what you don't want him/her to do. For example, "Please walk" is a more effective statement than "Don't run".
6. **Provide praise and other positive social attention immediately following compliance.**