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EARLY CHILDHOOD

Helping Children Learn™

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School

August 2005

WHY IS MY CHILD ACTING THIS WAY? (Help for Parents of Children with Challenging Behavior)

Typical Versus Challenging Behavior

At some point, all parents deal with the frustration of having their toddler spread eagle, crying or kicking, in the middle of a store aisle, or having their six-year-old disobey and challenge rules or limits. Although these behaviors are often hard for parents to deal with, they are very normal for children in these age groups. At almost every age, children may behave in ways that adults will not find easy or pleasant. However, with time and positive guidance from adults, these "trying" behaviors usually go away.

The term "challenging behavior" is often used to describe children's trying or "problem" behaviors that do not go away over time or after using typical tried-and-true discipline methods.

This issue of *Daily Parent* will give you strategies and resources to use for both kinds of behaviors.

What to Do?

When a child starts behaving in difficult ways, especially if it is sudden or unexpected, it is hard for parents and others to know what to do. Positive approaches to children have the most favorable



impact on their behavior. It is important for parents and caregivers to have a variety of strategies to use when raising and caring for children. Every strategy may not work for every child. Also, as a child gets older and changes, parents may need to change strategies and approaches with their child.

AGE/STAGES	TYPICAL BEHAVIORS
Toddlers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tantrums • Terrible Twos – "No!" being the most used word • Emerging independence • Bites or hits
Preschoolers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tests limits • Asks "Why?" a lot • May tell lies, steal, or argue
Young School-Agers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stubborn, refuses to do something • Bossy, likes to be in control • Doesn't like criticism • Still emerging independence – wants things own way

The approaches below are helpful for all children and are particularly useful in preventing or reducing trying behaviors.

- 1. Make sure your child or others are not in danger.** If your child is behaving in a way that may injure him or others, remove him from the situation or take steps to stop him. For young children, just pick them up and physically move them.
- 2. Change the setting or location.** If your child's behavior occurs only in certain situations, specific places, or only around certain people, you may be able to stop the behavior by observing what is happening in these instances. You may stop the behavior just by removing your child from that setting or from being around those people.

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3. Create a distraction. A young child can often be distracted into stopping an undesirable behavior. For example, if your preschooler has trouble sharing toys and gets into squabbles with other children over a toy, distract him or her with another toy. Present the toy in a way that makes it seem extra special.

4. Tell your child in advance what is happening. Most children like routines and predictability. Any changes in their normal day's routine could upset them and trigger negative behaviors. When possible, let your child know what will happen ahead of time. Prepare them for any changes to their daily routine. "Today, after your nap, we will go to the library to find some books to take home."

5. Respond calmly, speak briefly. Hard to do, but very important. To redirect or stop a behavior, try to remain and talk calmly. It is hard to listen to someone who is upset, talking in a loud voice or is talking so much that you can't really hear what it is they're trying to say. Don't try to talk about why something is right or wrong while your child or you are upset. Wait until a "teachable" moment when the both of you are away from the moment and calm.

6. Teach alternative behaviors. Teach your child what you want them to DO instead of what not to do. For example, say: "Tell me calmly what is wrong," instead of "Stop screaming and throwing things!"

7. Offer choices. Give your child choices to help build independence while also giving him some control over his environment. For example, when deciding on what to do, offer "Do you want to play outside or would you like to listen to some music?"

8. Notice the positive – catch your child doing "good". Adults tend to not focus when children are showing positive behaviors. If you reinforce positive behaviors, they will continue. Praise your child when positive behavior occurs. For example, "You did a nice job of waiting for your turn. You know how to wait calmly!"

9. Be consistent. Children like things to be consistent and predictable. Establish regular routines for your child and stick with them (examples: routines for eating, going to bed, getting dressed, and so on). Let your child know ahead of time, if possible, if there will be changes to your daily routines. "It's almost 8:30, time to get ready for bed."

10. Use humor or games. Angry or upset preschoolers and young school-age children can often be calmed with humor. "How fast can you jump in the bed? If you can do it in 1 minute you'll win the game!"

Source: PBS Parents online at www.pbs.org/parents

Beyond Typically Trying Behaviors

The term "challenging behavior" is used to describe children's difficult or "problem" behaviors that do not go away over time or after using typical tried-and-true discipline methods. As a parent, focus on the behavior and **not** the child.

Challenging behaviors can occur at home, in child care, in school, or any combination. They usually occur regularly rather than every once in awhile. Most challenging behaviors fall into one of these categories:

- **aggression:** biting, hitting, throwing, choking, verbal threats
- **self-injury:** head banging, scratching or picking skin, throwing self to floor
- **stereotypical or repeated motions:** gestures, hand flicking, mouthing, body rocking
- **classroom disruption:** hyperactivity, talking out, arguing, unusual vocalizations
- **noncompliance:** not responding to directions, defiance, bickering, jumping, crawling

WHY DO WE DISCIPLINE CHILDREN?

To teach children to be responsible (control their behavior and impulses, and to respond appropriately) and to understand that their behavior has consequences.

Discipline is not to punish or harm the child, but rather to teach better behavior.

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- **inappropriate play or behavior:** stealing, self-exposure, inappropriate touching of others, eating nonfood materials, other behaviors outside of social acceptance

Many of these behaviors can result in a child hurting someone else or himself, or cause disruption within a larger group setting

Reasons for Challenging Behaviors

There is always a reason for challenging behavior, but it may not be that easy to figure out. It is rarely the result of bad parenting, and it is never because a child is just “bad” or “wild.” Children’s growth and development depends on many factors, and their behavior is often the result of many factors.

Some very young children may bite or hit out of frustration, others become stubborn and don’t follow instruction because they’re trying to be independent. However, some challenging behaviors could have a physical cause. For example, if a child has hearing loss or doesn’t understand what is being asked of him, he may “act out” because he is frustrated and upset.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

- All behavior is a way to communicate?
- All behavior that persists is usually working for the child?
- All problem behavior has a cause?
- There is a connection between a child’s ability to communicate and challenging behavior?
- The pattern of behavior is important: not single or isolated events?
- The best approaches to challenging behavior are ones that
 - respond to the underlying cause and need for the behavior?
 - use positive approaches?
- The best way to prevent challenging behavior is to foster children’s social and emotional needs and skills?



What More Can You Do?

For more serious or challenging behaviors that do not respond to regular approaches or strategies, it

WHY ISN'T SPANKING DISCIPLINE?

Spanking is not discipline because it doesn't “teach” children what you want them to do. It also “teaches” that hitting is a way to react to or solve problems.

would be helpful to determine the cause or trigger of the challenging behavior(s). Some challenging behavior may have an underlying physical cause or be the result of an undiagnosed disability.

For persistent and serious challenging behaviors, parents need to get support from all adults who care for their child. Teamwork is essential to come up with a positive behavior support plan for any child and family dealing with challenging behaviors.

Steps to Take:

1. Consult your child’s doctor to rule out or diagnose any physical causes.
2. Speak with and get observations and feedback from your child care provider or child’s teacher.
3. Put together written observations of your child’s behavior over a period of time. Make sure your observations lists:
 - a. when the behavior occurs,
 - b. what happens before it occurs,
 - c. who are the people in the environment when it is happening,
 - d. what is said to your child, and
 - e. how the situation was handled.
4. Use a team approach to address your child’s behavior. The team should include you, other family members or people who interact with your child in a significant way, your child’s provider or teacher, your child’s doctor, and others.

Parents of children with challenging behaviors are often under a lot of stress. They may feel isolated and helpless if they do not have the necessary support. Challenging behaviors in children are not a new thing. However, there is a lot of new research, resources, and support available to parents and children. If your child or any of the children you care for has challenging behaviors, make sure you get the support you need.

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For More Information:

- **PBS Parents:** www.pbs.org/parents, Public Broadcasting Service, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314
- **Center for Evidence-Based Practice:** Young Children with Challenging Behavior, <http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/index.html>
- **Center on the Social and Emotional Foundation for Early Learning,** www.csefel.uiuc.edu/, Phone: (217) 333-4123 or (877) 275-3227
- **Family Connections,** www.familycommunications.org (sections for families, and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood), Phone: 412-687-2990
- **Positive Parenting,** University of Minnesota Extension Service, www.extension.umn.edu/projects/positiveparenting/index.html



- **Zero to Three,** www.zerotothree.org (parents section), National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, 2000 M Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036, Phone: (202) 638-1144

- **Childparenting.com** (website) www.childparenting.com

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