

Positive Strategies to Guide Child Behavior

Life with a young child can become filled with conflict and confusion. Sometimes even the simplest activity can turn quickly into disaster when a child's behavior is out of control. Many parents find themselves struggling with their child's challenging behavior at some point. The good news is these proven effective strategies can be used to create positive solutions for your family.

Tip #1: Keep Your Expectations Realistic. It is important for you to know and understand your child's abilities and limitations. Expecting too much or too little from your child can lead to problems and frustrations for you both. A three year old child cannot be expected to spend very much time in a shopping mall or other over-stimulating environments. When they become fussy is your signal it is time to leave.

Tip #2: Plan Ahead. Try to anticipate what your child may do or need in various situations. Make sure you plan ahead to set your child up for successful experiences. Don't plan outings during naptime or mealtime (unless eating is on the agenda). Hope for the best, but plan for the worst. Always have a back-up plan!

Tip #3: Clearly State Your Expectations in Advance. Some undesirable behavior occurs because your child can't act differently or simply doesn't want to act differently. Either way it helps to remember that your child can't read your mind. Be sure to give your child one clear instruction so he knows what you want him to do. Especially before going into a new situation, talk through the experience with your child, explaining how you expect him to behave.

Tip #4: Offer Limited, Reasonable Choices. Most children are not born with the built-in ability to make decisions and then accept the consequences. In order for your child to learn to take personal responsibility, give plenty of support and practice. Allow them to make choices where either decision is acceptable. For example, "Do you want to put your shoes on or do you want me to help you put your shoes on?"

Tip #5: Use "When . . . Then Statements". A "when . . . then" statement is a simple instruction that tells your child what he must do in order to earn a desired consequence (what he wants to do). Give your statement a positive focus. State it only once and set a reasonable time limit. Follow through and be prepared for your child's response – it may be "NO". "When you get your shoes on, we can go to the park."

Tip #6: Catch Your Child Being Good. How much time do you spend telling your child what he should not do? Instead, try giving specific, positive attention to behavior you want to see again and again. Be sure to say “thank you” as often as you can. When a preschooler waits a minute or two say, “Thank you for being patient. I appreciate that.”

Tip #7: Stay Calm. When your child’s behavior is unacceptable, you can choose to either respond to it or ignore it. If a reaction is required, acting calm with a minimum of attention reduces the risk of strengthening the very behavior you wish to discourage. Remember, you are modeling desired behavior. When you remain calm, your child learns appropriate ways to respond to difficult situations.

Tip #8: Use Neutral Time. Neutral time cannot be found in the middle of a difficult situation filled with strong feelings. Instead, it’s when everyone is calm enough to think, talk and listen. Don’t just pretend the difficult situation didn’t happen. Take time to talk about what happened and positive ways to handle problems in the future.

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Reference: Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior. (2006). *Positive Solutions For Families*. Brochure. Tampa Florida: University of South Florida

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