



Behavior Guidance for Young Children

Discipline is not punishment. It is a means of helping a child learn acceptable ways to deal with personal feelings and desires. Punishment, on the other hand, is a reaction to misbehavior that is usually hurtful and may even be unrelated to the misbehavior. Punishment is ineffective because it does not teach appropriate behavior. Though it may prevent a repeat of the behavior in the short term, it does not teach the child "what to do instead," so it rarely works in the long term. Punishment may release the teacher's angry feelings and make the adult feel better, but it can create fear or humiliation in the child, and rarely leads to the creation of a respectful relationship.

Criticizing, discouraging, creating obstacles and barriers, blaming, shaming, using sarcastic or cruel humor, or using physical punishment are some negative disciplinary methods used with young children. Often saying "Stop that!" "Don't do it that way!" or "You never..." is harmful to children's self-esteem. Such discipline techniques as removal from the group, or isolation in a time-out chair or a corner, may have negative consequences for the child. Any adult might occasionally do any of these things. Doing any or all of them more than once in a while means that a negative approach to discipline has become a habit and urgently needs to be altered before the child experiences low self-esteem as a permanent part of her personality.

When children misbehave, teachers and other adults need to help the child learn appropriate behaviors. Punishment may give immediate results, but does punishment build self-control? Do children learn to cope with their strong feelings and tough problems if they are punished? Research supports the conclusion that discipline works better than punishment and that children who are punished become very different people than children who are disciplined.

Appropriate approaches to discipline are shown to increase a children's self-esteem, allow them to feel valued, encourage them to feel cooperative, enable them to learn gradually the many skills involved in taking some responsibility for what happens to them, motivate them to change their strategy rather than to blame others, help them to take initiative, relate successfully to others, and solve problems.

When we use this approach to discipline we are using developmentally appropriate guidance. Developmentally appropriate means we have a clear understanding of the stage of development the child is in. We know what can be expected for the age. With this in mind, we choose to pick a discipline method that best fits the child and the situation.

BEHAVIOR GUIDANCE IS:

Guidance is teaching. It is the process by which we help children:

- Identify appropriate and inappropriate behavior
- Learn appropriate problem-solving strategies
- Develop impulse control, empathy, perspective taking and self-esteem
- Learn acceptance of self and others

BEHAVIOR GUIDANCE IS NOT:

- Punishing children for misbehavior
- Valuing compliance over learning
- Power assertion . . . (I win, you lose)
- Using any strategy that hurts, shames, or belittles a child

Principles of a Guidance Approach

Research tells us that it's very important to respect a child's stage of development and not to label a child as a behavioral failure. Young children have intense feelings and needs and are naturally loud, curious, messy, willful, impatient, demanding, creative, forgetful, fearful, self-centered and full of energy. We accept children for the individuals they are, and have appropriate expectations. Seven principles outline the basics of a guidance approach:

1. Children are in the process of learning acceptable behavior.
2. An effective guidance approach is preventive because it respects feelings even while it addresses behavior.
3. Adults need to understand the reasons for children's behavior.
4. A supportive relationship between an adult and a child is the most critical component of effective guidance.
5. Adults use forms of guidance and group management that help children learn self-control and responsiveness to the needs of others.
6. Adults model appropriate expression of their feelings.
7. Adults continue to learn even as they teach.

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Positive Guidance Strategies

- Show you value children
- State the "but"
- Offer a solution
- Be positive
- Set realistic limits
- Provide for a period of preparation
- Keep it light and non-threatening
- Use active listening skills when working with children
- Teach appropriate behavior through modeling
- Use natural consequences
- Use logical consequences
- Help children to manage strong emotions
- Redirect children's behavior by diverting and distracting
- Redirect children's behavior by making substitutions
- Teach children not to be victims
- Teach children to withdraw from certain situations
- Help children resolve conflict through problem solving
- Consider the environment
- Use appropriate and relevant praise (encouragement) to reinforce appropriate behavior
- Think broadly and be realistic

Preventing Problems

- Establish a loving and trusting relationship with children
- Demonstrate coping skills
- Prepare an appropriate environment
- Be clear about rules
- Provide consistent follow through
- Schedule activities with children's needs in mind
- Help children solve problems, make choices and understand consequences
- Creating a positive climate promotes self-discipline
- Examine your own value system and assess if this field is a match