



Helping Children & Families Grow Together
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Guidelines for Behavior Modification

Praise:

- Praise is a specific behavior (ex: say “I like how you took out the garbage the first time I asked”) rather than providing global praise (ex: “your a great kid”). This will allow the child to more readily identify which behavior you are pleased with. Since children crave praise, the better they understand how to get it, the more you will see of the positive behaviors.
- Provide praise immediately/as soon as possible after the behavior as occurred.
- Be consistent. Praise the behavior each time it occurs (at least at first while developing the behavior.)
- Do not qualify your praise. For example, do not say “I’m so glad you took out the garbage when I asked. Why can’t you listen like that more often?” This turns the intended praise into a criticism of the child.
- Provide praise with the same level of intensity that you would provide criticism. Many parents praise faintly (“nice job”), but criticize loudly, with great emotional intensity (“How could you DO a thing like this!”) If a child is trying to get intense focused attention from the parent and can only get it through negative behaviors, the negative behaviors will continue.
- Some parents may have difficulty identifying any praiseworthy behavior in their child. As noted above childhood PTSD is sometimes manifested by irritable mood and angry outbursts (APA, 2000) and you may understandably be focused on these behaviors. “Catch your child being good” or at least catch times when the child is exhibiting no overtly negative behaviors, and praise that (for example, “Its’ so nice to sit here with you watching TV so peacefully”). When children respond to such comments with sullen responses (“just lave me alone”), the parent has the perfect opportunity to practice active ignoring, as described below.

Active Ignoring:

- Active Ignoring refers to the parent consciously making a decision to not react to certain negative behaviors the child exhibits. This is based on the idea that





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- children want focused, emotionally intense attention from their parents and others, and they will continue to exhibit behaviors that get this type of attention, even if the attention takes a negative form like yelling at the child.
- Without realizing it, parents often attend and respond more to misbehavior than to good behavior in their children. Thus, they are inadvertently reinforcing (rewarding through attention) the very negative behaviors they want to discourage. IN order to reinforce desired behaviors, you must learn to praise these good behaviors, and ignore most negative ones.
 - Of course you cannot and should not ignore overtly dangerous behaviors, but should punish them appropriately as discussed below. Examples of behaviors which parents often respond negatively to, which should usually be ignored include the following:
 - Defiant or angry verbalizations directed at the parent
 - Making nasty faces, rolling eyes, smirking at the parent
 - Mocking, taunting, mimicking the parent.
 - Such behaviors, while unpleasant, are not harmful and are most often the child's effort to "get the parents goat" i.e. to provoke a negative response.

Time-Out:

- Another strategy that is effective in decreasing undesirable behavior is "timeout". You've probably heard about timeouts before, and you may have even tried it with your children. But, timeouts are a bit more complicated than most people think.
- The primary goal of a timeout is to remove the child temporarily from a reinforcing environment or situation in order to decrease an undesirable behavior.
- Timeouts should not be done in a crowded room. It should be done in a quiet, non-stimulating room, and should last only a few minutes. Some experts recommend that it should last, at most, for one minute for every year of the child's age (e.g. 6 year old child will have a 6 minute time out). Other experts consider a 3-minute timeout to be long enough for most children aged 7 years or younger.
- I recommend using time outs as a "break" to teach the child coping skills. Discuss why the child was put into a timeout/break, how long the child will be





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expected to stay in timeout, what you want the child to do differently prior to leaving timeout. This should be utilized as a learning and teaching moment.

Behavior Charts:

- A behavior chart is another useful tool to manage children’s behavior.
- You can arrange it so that you specifically pick behaviors that you would like to see more often. Always try to frame goals in a positive way. For example, instead of setting a goal to “stop being mean to our brother when he wants to play with you”, the goal can be framed more positively, such as “sharing toys with your brother.”
- A goal can be set for this, say, 3 times per week or more, and stickers can be used each day to document whether or not the child shared his toys with his brother on that day. At the end of the week, the stickers are added up, and if the goal is met, the reward is earned.
- Parents can be creative with the types of behavior that they pick for the behavior charts, but it is most helpful to:
 - Be consistent
 - Frame goals positively
 - Set short-term goals (use one day or one week rather than one month)
 - Follow through with rewards
 - If the reward at the end of the week is ice cream, be prepared and avoid postponing the reward. The behavior chart is most likely to be effective if parents follow through consistently and predictable and when children are explained what they need to do to obtain the reward.

