

The 11 Behavior Management Principles

April 2008

Special Points of Interest

- Organize behavior management by routines
- Behavioral principles apply to life, not just to problematic behaviors
- Most of these strategies are good for plain ol' parenting
- Parenting is not a one-way street; it is "transactional"

The List

1. First, it gets worse.
2. Pick your battles.
3. Prevention is better than attempting a cure.
4. Be consistent but recognize that life isn't consistent.
5. Structure can help.
6. Ignore what you don't want.
7. Attend to the desired behavior.
8. Negative attention can still be reinforcing.
9. Spend quality, nonconflictual time with your children.
10. Have realistic expectations
11. Discipline is teaching.



Discipline is teaching

Background of Behavior

Problem behaviors are maintained by

- Attention,
- Escape (or wanting something), and
- "Automatic reinforcement" (operant

mechanisms independent of the social environment).

Behaviors have antecedents and consequences that should be assessed and, if necessary, modified.

Antecedent

Behavior

Consequence

1. First, it gets worse

Whenever you start a new behavior plan, the problem behavior tends to worsen. The child might not like the new contingencies or the new antecedents, so the frequency, duration, intensity, or rate of the behavior might increase.

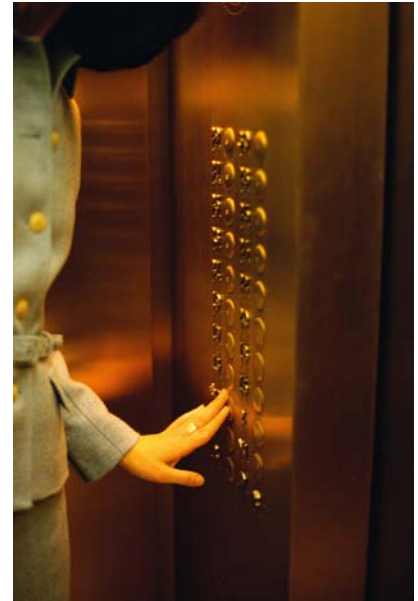
Some families and teachers give up at this point. They say, "It isn't working."

Actually, it might be the beginning of success; it is, after all, having an effect, albeit in the wrong direction, on the child's behavior.

If the behavior is eventually extinguished, this is called an extinction burst. For example, if you ride the

same elevator every day, getting in and pushing the button for your floor, you are rewarded by the doors closing and the elevator taking you to your destination. One day, you get in and push the button, and nothing happens. Do you immediately say, "Oh, this must not work any more. I'll just take the stairs to the 11th floor?" Or do you push the button again... and again... and harder... and faster... until you eventually give up or the doors close? That's the extinction burst.

Families should prepare themselves for the behavior getting worse and should stick with the plan for as long as they can.



2. Pick your battles

Sometimes, children with one challenging behavior have other challenging behaviors. Families and teachers are tempted to deal with many problems at one time. This is overwhelming for adults and children alike. List the things you want to work on and put them into priority order of importance. Then pick the top 1-3. This will allow you to focus and the child will not have to remember as many rules.

When children display problem behaviors, adults might assume everything they do is a problem. We sometimes see a parent or teacher chastise one child for doing something and not chastise another child for doing the same thing. They assume the first

child is up to no good.

Picking your battles is about developing a plan for teaching appropriate behavior. It will help adults feel in control of the situation.

"Developing a plan for teaching appropriate behavior... will help adults feel in control."

3. Prevention is better than attempting a cure

Some parents and teachers are masters at preventing behavior problems by keeping children busy. Children can do only so many things at one time, so, if they are appropriately "engaged" in a game, with a toy, or just hanging out with other people, they are less likely to be



Keep a child engaged to prevent behavior problems

aggressive or otherwise "nonengaged."

Adults can begin by making sure that children's physical environments, such as their bedrooms, living rooms, or classrooms, have plenty of materials to keep children engaged.

Part of prevention is sometimes anticipation; if you see the child starting to lose it, redirect the child. Other principles have to do with teaching children self-control. Here, we're working on preventing bad times.

4. Be consistent but recognize that life isn't consistent

Children learn more easily when the same “contingencies” (rules) apply every time a situation arises. When an adult allows a behavior to occur sometimes, but other times doesn't, the child has a 50-50 chance of displaying the behavior again. A parent or teacher should therefore be fairly consistent to increase the odds of the child learning appropriate behavior.



Consistency across adults is helpful

What about consis-

tency from one adult to another? It is very helpful for adults in the same setting, such as home or school, to have the same rules. And it might be helpful to have the same rules at home as at school, but that is not always possible or appropriate. Don't worry too much. Children can learn the difference.

Furthermore, with all the challenges of being an effective parent or teacher, inconsistency should not become something to

stress out about. Life is not consistent, so children can learn the *usual* rules, even if they are not *always* the rules.

5. Structure can help

When children can predict what will happen next, in a day or even in a routine, they are more likely to learn appropriate behavior. Too much structure can lead to conflict, though. Adults need to find the right balance between predictability and opportunities for children to do what interests them.

6. Ignore what you don't want 7. Attend to the desired behavior

These are together because they are two sides of the same coin. Children are reinforced by adult attention; see No. 8, following.

When children are engaged in appropriate behavior, adults should pay attention to them, without interrupting their engagement. Similarly, when children are engaged in inappropriate behavior, as much as

possible, adults should ignore them.

We often find ourselves doing the opposite! We leave alone children behaving appropriately and we are on the case of children who are pushing our buttons.

“Developing a plan for teaching appropriate behavior... will help adults feel in control.”

We might be making matters worse.

One example of this is when we spend a lot of time talking to a child when he or she has done something wrong. Speak little, when reprimanding a child. Talk later.

8. Negative attention can still be reinforcing

In parents' and teachers' attempts to teach “discipline” to children, they forget that scolding a child might increase the likelihood of re-occurrence of the behavior. If you have to tell the child what he did wrong, make it short and neutral.



Don't let the child inadvertently learn that this is one way to get attention.

9. Spend quality, nonconflictual time with your children

At the end of the day, you don't want to feel as though you have spent all your time with your child, fighting. Fill up your parenting bucket with times, even short ones, where your child and you enjoyed each other's company.

JUNIOR LEAGUE-VANDERBILT CENTER FOR PARENTING YOUNG CHILDREN

Vanderbilt University School of Medicine
Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt
3401 West End Avenue, Suite 460 West
Nashville, TN 37203

Phone: 615-936-FMLY (3659)
Fax: 615-936-2878
E-mail: parenting.center@vanderbilt.edu



MONROE CARELL JR.
Children's Hospital
at Vanderbilt
Center for Child Development

Family-centeredness, responsiveness to the community, focus on function, evidence based

We're on the Web:

www.vanderbiltchildrens.com/parenting

The Parenting Center provides informational and emotional support to families of young children, birth through 7 years. The Center is funded in part by the Junior League of Nashville Home Board and in part by the Music City Tennis Invitational.

*The Parenting Center provides **parent coaching** to help parents identify and learn strategies to promote their children's engagement, independence, and social relationships. Highly qualified Parent Coaches serve as a resource to parents about common parenting questions, more significant concerns, and even very difficult situations, such as might be found in children with challenging behaviors or disabilities, including autism.*

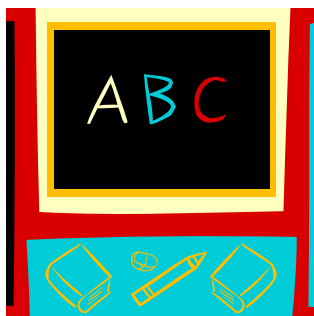
*Parent coaching is provided in children's homes, generally, but we can also see children at the Parenting Center offices. We also provide **teacher coaching**.*

The Parenting Center is part of a group of projects that Robin McWilliam directs, focused on the successful functioning of children and families in their natural environments.

10. Have realistic expectations

Sometimes, children's "challenging behaviors" are a discrepancy between what they do or are interested in and what the adults in their lives expect. And, sometimes, those expectations are too high for the child's developmental level.

Remember two things. First, it takes time—that is, development—for children to learn appropriate behaviors such as sharing, being considerate, and good manners. Second, a child's chronological age is not always the best barometer for judging whether he or she should be able to behave in certain ways. Some children are slower to develop.



11. Discipline is teaching

This is possibly the most important principle of all.

Discipline should not be considered punishment. When children display challenging behaviors, we want to teach them alternative, replacement behaviors. We need to balance teaching them what *not* to do with what *to* do.

If parents and teachers remember this, they will be calm and helpful in addressing these difficult situations. And they are more likely to follow these 11 principles.

A good general strategy is Sit and Watch.

Sit and Watch

When you have to "consequence" inappropriate behaviors, try this:

1. Give the child 2 warnings.
2. If the behavior continues, move the child to the side of the activity, where the child can still see what else is going on in the routine.
3. Tell the child, "When you are ready to play nicely, you can come and play."
4. As soon as the child decides to return, welcome the child.
5. Do not insist that the child stay in Sit and Watch for any length of time.
6. Return the child to Sit and Watch as many times as necessary, if the unacceptable behavior continues, within reason.

This procedure teaches the child to take responsibility for deciding to play nicely