



Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children

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POSITIVE SOLUTIONS FOR FAMILIES

Eight Practical Tips for Parents of Young Children with Challenging Behavior

by Matt Timm and Jill Giacomini



Has life with your young child become filled with conflict and confusion? Does it seem as if even the simplest activity can turn quickly into disaster when your child's behavior is out of control? Are you beginning to feel as if things are getting worse instead of better? You're not alone. Many, if not most, parents find themselves struggling with the challenging behavior of their young child at some point in time. The good news is that there are evidence-based, effective strategies based on what the child is communicating that you can use to create positive solutions for your family.

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How to Use This List

Review each of the tips below and think about situations you have experienced that are similar to the provided examples. You will need to decide which strategies are likely to work best for your family. You might want to try one or two of the strategies at first and then add others as you become more comfortable with the process. Remember, the idea is to develop specific approaches for your own family that can be used in everyday life.

Tip #1: Keep Your Expectations Realistic

It is important for you to know and understand your child's abilities and limitations. When you expect too much or too little from your child it can lead to problems and frustrations for you both.

~You are in a restaurant with a group of friends. The waiter took your order over 30 minutes ago and your food still hasn't arrived. 2 ½ year-old Simone is getting impatient—she is throwing her crayons and saying that she wants down. Instead of getting angry and frustrated with her for acting up, try taking her for a short walk to give her and others a needed break.~

Tip #2: Plan Ahead

Try to anticipate what your child may do or need in various situations. Make sure that you plan ahead to help your child have a successful experience. Hope for the best, but plan for the worst. Always have a back-up plan!

~Your family is in the car headed to your mother's house for dinner. It is usually a short drive,

but rush-hour traffic is snarled, it's 6:30 pm, and you're already 45 minutes late. Your 3 year-old is screaming for food in the backseat. Luckily, you remembered to bring some snacks and a sippy cup of water to hold him over until you can make it home~

Tip #3: Clearly State Your Expectations in Advance

Some undesirable behavior occurs because your child can't act differently, other times it occurs because your child simply doesn't want to act differently. Either way it helps for you to remember that your child cannot read your mind. Be sure to give your child one clear instruction so that he knows what it is that you want him to do.

~You are visiting at your sister's house and your daughter has been playing with her favorite cousin. Over the course of the afternoon, toys have been tossed aside and scattered throughout the room. When you say, "Come on Alicia, it's time to get ready to go!" she ignores you completely and continues to play. A better approach might be to say, "All right, time to get going. Alicia, let's start by putting the blocks in their box. I see it over there in the corner!"~

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 they will need plenty of support and practice.

~You have just picked up your son at childcare and he doesn't want to get into his car seat. You sense a battle of the wills coming on. One way to avoid a struggle might be to say, "Zachary, we can't start the car until you get buckled in your seat. Do you want to climb up in there yourself, or do you want Daddy to put you in?"~

Tip #5: Use "When...Then" Statements

A "when...then" statement is a simple instruction that tells your child what he or she must do in order to earn a desired consequence (what he/she wants to do). This is also known as a contingency statement.

When you use a contingency statement, be sure you:

- ✓ Give it a positive focus
- ✓ State it only once
- ✓ Set a reasonable time limit
- ✓ Follow through
- ✓ Are prepared for your child's response—it may be "NO"

~It's a sunny day and your barefoot child has decided she would like to go out in the backyard and play. She starts outside and you stop her and say, "No...put on your shoes." She starts to throw a tantrum. Here's an alternative approach you might want to use next time. "When you put on your shoes, then you may go outside". You are not just saying "No". You are letting her know what needs to happen in order for her to reach her desired destination.~

Tip #6: Catch Your Child Being Good

Did you ever stop to think about how much time you spend telling your child what he should not do? Instead, try giving specific, positive attention to the behavior that you want to see. This will teach your child what you want him to do and increase the likelihood that this behavior will occur again and again.

~You are enjoying a remarkably calm family meal. Instead of waiting for your 4 year-old to begin fidgeting, trying to leave, or stuff green beans down his shirt, you look at him and exclaim, "Manuel, it makes Daddy so happy to see you eating your dinner like a big boy!"~

Tip #7: Stay Calm

When your child's behavior is unacceptable, you can choose to either respond to it or ignore it. If you decide that a reaction is required, remember that the least response necessary is



usually best. Acting calm with a minimum of attention will reduce the risk of strengthening the very behavior you wish to discourage. When you remain calm, it also gives you time to think about how you want to respond. Remember, you are modeling desired behavior for your child—the more out-of-control your child becomes, the more self-control you need to show. When you remain calm your child learns appropriate ways to respond to difficult situations.

~You are cleaning your house in preparation for your in-laws' annual visit. You go in the kitchen for just a moment and return to your family room to find that your 2 year-old son has colored on a white wall with red and blue crayons. Your immediate reaction is to respond negatively. However, you think twice, take a deep breath and say, "Christopher, paper is for coloring, Mommy's walls are not," and buckle him in his high chair where he can continue to create his art on paper. ~

Tip #8: Use Neutral Time

Neutral time cannot be found in the middle of a difficult situation filled with strong feelings. Instead, neutral time is when everyone is calm enough to think and talk and listen. It's important to remember that neutral time can occur either before or after a child's unacceptable behavior occurs. You can talk about what happened earlier and talk about positive ways to handle problems in the future. The challenge is to identify neutral time and make use of these opportunities.

~You are sitting on the sofa reading books with your daughter when you look up at the clock and realize it is 7:30—bedtime is approaching fast. Getting Emma to brush her teeth each night has become more and more of a struggle. As you hold her on your lap you say, "Almost bedtime kiddo. Hey, tonight Mommy is going to brush her teeth at the same time you do—it'll be fun for us to do it together!"~