FACT SHEET

DISCIPLINE: TEACHING AND GUIDING TO CHANGE YOUNG CHILD’S BEHAVIOR

Many children exhibit behaviors that adults do not like. They may throw a ball in the house, or refuse to clean up their toys, or hit other children. How can teacher/caregivers manage these challenging behaviors? Four helpful steps are:

- Understand the cause of the behavior
- Have a good relationship with the child
- Encourage good behavior
- Decrease problem behaviors

Here is more detail about each step:

Understanding the cause of the behavior
Sometimes the problem behavior may be the result of a child’s personality, or “temperament.” For example, some children are extremely active. They like to run and throw. They may be so active and noisy that they bother other children or adults. If a child’s behavior relates to his temperament, you may shape this behavior but you are unlikely to change the child totally. Sometimes children need help to express their temperament in a positive way. For example, an active child who bothers other children inside the building may need more time for outdoor play. Create an environment where children can express their temperament safely and positively.

Sometimes a problem behavior in child care is not a problem in other settings. For example, parents may feel proud that their child is quiet and non-assertive. The child’s behavior may be appropriate for the child’s culture. Some families teach children not to look at an adult when that adult is speaking to them. In these cases, it may be inappropriate for the teacher/caregiver to change the child’s behavior. Try to understand the family’s beliefs and cultural practices.

A meeting with the child’s parents/guardians can help. The teacher/caregiver must describe the behavior without criticizing the parent or child. For example, the child’s teacher/caregiver can say “Sometimes Katy’s running is a problem at the facility.” or “Please help me understand why your child looks away when I speak with her.”

Sometimes children have a lot of stress at home or in the community. They react to stress with negative emotions or problem behaviors. If you notice a change in the child’s behavior, inform the family members who are responsible for the child’s care. You may say, “I notice that Jonathan is fighting more than he used to. Do you have any ideas about why this is happening?”

Have a good relationship with the child.
To help children change their behavior, adults need to have a good relationship with them. Children will be most able to change when they feel good about themselves. Adults can help children feel positive and capable. Children want to please the adults they like and respect. To build a good relationship with children, you must meet their needs. Praise children when they are showing good behavior. For example, you might praise children when they are playing quietly, sharing a toy with another child, waiting for a turn, or trying to be helpful. You can use...
short messages such as, “That was great!” or “I like how well you are waiting.” You can also provide a hug, a smile, or a pat on the back. Try to be honest. Do not be sarcastic. For example, do not say, “I like the way you are sitting” to a child who is running around. Children do not understand a sarcastic message. Instead, say, “I would like you to sit down.”

Many times, adults can give children choices appropriate to their developmental level. This builds a positive relationship. For example, you can ask the child, “Which of these two games would you like to play?” Choices make the child feel respected. This helps the children respect you in return. When children don’t want to comply, it may help to offer a choice. For example, if a child is refusing to lie down at naptime, you can say, “You must rest on your mat, but you can choose a book to look at while you rest.” Never give children an option that you do not want them to choose.

**Encourage good behaviors.**
Behavior is usually learned. It is shaped by the results, or “consequences.” Behaviors that are rewarded are likely to continue. You can reward a child with praise for finishing a task. Sometimes just a smile will be enough. Encouragement and praise should label the behaviors, not the child, e.g., “good listening”, “good eating”, instead of “good boy”. Another reward is telling a family member what a good job the child did when the child listened.

Consequences that follow naturally or logically from a previous event are called “natural reinforcers”. Natural reinforcers are very good methods for shaping behavior. For example, if a child’s rough behavior broke the toy, then he cannot play with that toy any more. You can use natural reinforcers to change behavior. For example, you can tell the class, “We will go outside when the room is clean.” The trip outside becomes the natural reward for the cleanup.

Do not reinforce behaviors you do not like. For example, if you laugh at a child’s tantrum, it may increase the number of tantrums. If you give the child food every time she is upset, it might teach the child that eating is the way to handle stress. If you pay a lot of attention every time a child throws a tantrum, the child may begin to have more tantrums. Your attention may be a reward for the tantrum, even though you did not intend it to be.

Remember to pay more attention when the child’s behavior is appropriate than when the child is acting out. Make sure to encourage good behaviors and when necessary, take steps to decrease problem behaviors.

**Decrease undesirable behavior.**
Children learn faster when they receive rewards for good behavior than when they are punished for problem behavior. However, all children will demonstrate behaviors that should be changed. Punishments, called “negative reinforcements,” may work under some circumstances. There are many different ways to give negative reinforcements.

One way is to withdraw positive behavior or rewards. If you have a good relationship with a child and usually provide lots of praise, ignoring the child is negative reinforcement. You tell children you want them to change by ignoring the problem behavior. Often, the most powerful punishment occurs as a result of natural consequences. Sometimes negative or unpleasant consequences follow naturally from the child’s behavior. For example, if one child hits another child and the second child walks away, the effect serves as a negative reinforcement. The child is left alone.

Another effective punishment is a logical consequence. If the child scribbles on the wall, take the crayon away. Encourage the child to help clean the wall. Plan and use punishments consistently
to make them work. Restrict the child’s use of the crayons for a day or so, and say, “You cannot use the crayons. You must learn to use crayons on paper not on the wall.” When the child seems to understand, give the crayons to the child and say, “You may use crayons as long as you use them on paper and not on the wall.”

Punishments include taking away privileges. For example, if a child hits, you may decrease the time he has for his favorite activity. Punishments can also be uncomfortable or undesirable circumstances that the adult requires because of the child’s behavior. Most children want to be near the adults and part of the group. A form of punishment is making the child sit away from his caregivers and friends. You might try saying to a 5-year-old, “You hit your friend. You must sit by yourself for five minutes.”

To work, punishment should occur immediately after the problem behavior occurs. Adults should remain calm when they punish a child. Very little discussion is usually necessary. Long discussions confuse young children. You can say, “You colored on the wall. You cannot play with crayons.”

Teachers/caregivers may not spank or use other forms of physical punishment to a child. Child care regulations prohibit all forms of physical punishment. Physical punishments are not good methods to teach children how to behave properly. They learn what not to do, but not what they should do. Physical punishment does not foster a good relationship between the adult and the child. Children feel hurt and angry when an adult hits or otherwise hurts them. They learn that hitting or otherwise hurting someone is a way to show disapproval.

Prohibited discipline measures and staff behaviors should be listed in program policies as in Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd Edition (CFOC3), Standard 2.2.0.9. These are:

a. The use of corporal punishment/physical abuse (1) (punishment inflicted directly on the body), including, but not limited to
   1. Hitting, spanking (striking a child with an open hand or instrument on the buttocks or extremities with the intention of modifying behavior without causing physical injury), shaking, slapping, twisting, pulling, squeezing, or biting
   2. Demanding excessive physical exercise, excessive rest, or strenuous or bizarre postures
   3. Forcing and/or demanding physical touch from the child
   4. Compelling a child to eat or have soap, food, spices, or foreign substances in his or her mouth
   5. Exposing a child to extreme temperatures
b. Isolating a child in an adjacent room, hallway, closet, darkened area, play area, or any other area where the child cannot be seen or supervised
c. Binding or tying to restrict movement, such as in a car seat (except when traveling) or taping the mouth
d. Using or withholding food as a punishment or reward
e. Toilet learning/training methods that punish, demean, or humiliate a child
f. Any form of emotional abuse, including rejecting, terrorizing, extended ignoring, isolating, or corrupting a child
g. Any form of sexual abuse (Sexual abuse in the form of inappropriate touching is an act that induces or coerces children in a sexually suggestive manner or for the sexual gratification of the adult, such as sexual penetration and/or overall inappropriate touching or kissing.)
h. Abusive, profane, or sarcastic language or verbal abuse, threats, or derogatory remarks about the child or child’s family
i. Any form of public or private humiliation, including threats of physical punishment (2)
j. Physical activity/outdoor time taken away as punishment

Children should not see hitting, ridicule, and/or similar types of behavior among staff members.
Punishment is never enough for shaping behavior. Punishment shows a child what behavior is unacceptable. Children need specific information about what behavior is acceptable. For example, if a child hits his friend, in addition to any punishment, the adult can say, “Tell him you are angry. Do not hit.” If a child runs where only walking is safe, tell him to walk rather than run.

**Time-out (also known as temporary separation)**

Sometimes adults cannot think of natural or logical consequences when a child misbehaves. Sometimes children are too upset to listen to what the adult is saying. Sometimes children hurt other children or adults physically. Handling the injury may need to take priority over all else. These are times to use a time-out. Use time-outs only for children who are at least two years of age. To use time-out, follow these steps:

1. Choose a spot where you want children to go after they misbehave. Make sure that the children know ahead of time, the spot for time-out and the rules that determine what behaviors would send them to time-out. Use time-out consistently and for only a few behaviors you want to change. Do not change the rules when the child misbehaves. Changing the rules when the child misbehaves slows learning to behave properly.

2. When a child does the problem behavior, tell that child to go to time-out. For example, you can say, “You hit your friend. Go to time-out.” Many children will walk to the right spot. If a child refuses to go, gently lead the child to the spot by the hand. If a child refuses to sit in the spot, you may need to hold that child. Sit behind and hold the child gently, but firmly. Sitting behind the child will make it difficult for the child to kick or bite. Do not talk to or make eye contact with the child whose behavior you are trying to change during time-out.

3. Time-out should last one minute for each year of the child's age, e.g., a 4-year old would stay in time-out 4 minutes. Use a timer to let the child and adult know when the time-out is complete. It also separates the adult from the punishment to some degree. At the end of the time-out, resume activity and attention as it was before the problem behavior occurred.

Sometimes this form of time-out is impossible. For example, on a field trip, the child cannot go to the familiar spot. Instead, you may remain silent for the same amount of time. Most children find this negative reinforcement. You could take the child's toy away for the same amount of time. Sometimes “time-away” is better than time out. For example, if the child threw the blocks at another child, then he may need “time-away” from the blocks.

**Summary**

Children need to learn the rules of the home and classroom. Adults who care for children must teach children these rules. Discipline is education and guidance about how to behave with other individuals and how to control your impulses. Discipline requires a positive relationship between adult and child. Adults teach children by their own behavior because children imitate adults. A calm and kind approach to discipline encourages learning. Children understand consistent rules that are stated clearly, simply and briefly. Long explanations confuse young children. Punishment should be reserved for circumstances where all other methods fail. In the context of a positive relationship, a simple time-out that separates the child from the group has a powerful impact on the child’s learning. Physical and other ineffective methods of discipline should be prohibited. These are specified in *Caring for Our Children, national standards for early education and child care programs*, Standard 2.2.0.9. These prohibited measures should be listed in the written policies of early childhood education and school programs and enforced.
For additional information, see:


RELATED STANDARDS
2.1.1.6 Transitioning within Programs and Indoor and Outdoor Learning/Play Environments
2.2.0.7 Handling Physical Aggression, Biting, and Hitting
2.2.0.8 Preventing Expulsions, Suspensions, and Other Limitations in Services
2.2.0.9 Prohibited Caregiver/Teacher Behaviors
3.4.4.1 Recognizing and Reporting Suspected Child Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation
3.4.4.2 Immunity for Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect
3.4.4.3 Preventing and Identifying Shaken Baby Syndrome/Abusive Head Trauma
3.4.4.4 Care for Children Who Have Been Abused/Neglected
3.4.4.5 Facility Layout to Reduce Risk of Child Abuse and Neglect
9.2.1.3 Enrollment Information to Parents/Guardians and Caregivers/Teachers
9.2.1.6 Written Discipline Policies
9.4.1.6 Availability of Documents to Parents/Guardians

Prepared by: Heidi M. Feldman, MD, PhD, FAAP and Janet Laughlin, MEd
UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh

Reviewed and updated by: Beth A. DelConte, MD, FAAP 1/2011
Susan S. Aronson, MD, FAAP 6/2018