

Tips for Managing Difficult Behaviors at Home

Preventing Problem Behaviors

AVOID:

- Assuming expectations are understood: Don't assume kids know what is expected of them - spell it out! Be specific and ask for expectations to be repeated back to you.
- Calling out directions from a distance: Be sure to tell children important instructions face-to-face. Compliance goes down with distance.
- Telling kids to change activities without warning: Transitions can be hard for kids, especially in the middle of something they are enjoying. Having warning gives children the chance to find a good stopping place for an activity. Give a few minutes for compliance.
- Giving too many instructions or complicated directions: Try to give short, specific directions with frequent checks for understanding.

DO:

- Be aware of the situation: Consider and manage environmental and emotional factors- hunger, fatigue, anxiety, or distractions can all make it much more difficult for children to reign in their behavior.
- Adjust the environment: When its homework time, for instance, remove distractions like video screens and toys, provide a snack, establish an organized place for kids to work and make sure to schedule some breaks- attention to tasks isn't infinite.
- Let kids have a choice: As kids grow up, it's important they have a say in their own scheduling. Giving a structured choice when giving a demand— "Do you want to take a shower after dinner or before?"—can help them feel empowered and encourage them to become more self-regulating.

Responding to Problem Behaviors

AVOID:

- Giving negative attention: Children value attention from the important adults in their life so much that any attention- positive or negative- is better than none. Negative attention, such as raising your voice or spanking, can actually increase bad behavior over time.
- Delayed consequences: The most effective consequences are immediate. Every moment that passes after a behavior, your child is less likely to link her behavior to the consequence.
- Disproportionate consequences: Parents understandably get very frustrated. At times, they may be so frustrated that they overreact. A huge consequence can be demoralizing for children and they may give up even trying to behave.

- Positive consequences for problem behavior: When a child dawdles instead of putting on his shoes or picking up his blocks and, in frustration, you do it for him, you're increasing the likelihood that he will dawdle again next time.

DO:

- Give positive attention for positive behaviors: Giving your child positive attention for being good helps maintain the ongoing good behavior. Positive attention enhances the quality of the relationship, improves self-esteem, and feels good for everyone involved.
- Ignore actively: This should be used ONLY with minor misbehaviors—NOT aggression and NOT very destructive behavior. Active ignoring involves the deliberate withdrawal of attention when a child starts to misbehave—as you ignore, you wait for positive behavior to resume. You want to give positive attention as soon as the desired behavior starts.
- Use reward menus: Rewards are a tangible way to give children positive feedback for desired behaviors. A reward is something a child earns, an acknowledgement that she's doing something that's difficult for her. Rewards are most effective as motivators when the child can choose from a variety of things: extra time on the compute, a special treat, etc. Rewards should be linked to specific behaviors and always delivered consistently.
- Use Time-Outs: Time outs are one of the most effective consequences parents can use but also one of the hardest to do correctly. Make sure that the amount of time is age-appropriate. Age-appropriate generally means one minute per year of age.
- Be consistent: Randomly administering time outs when you're feeling frustrated undermines the system and makes it harder for the child to connect behaviors with consequences.
- Set rules and follow them: During a time-out, there should be NO talking to the child until you are ending the time-out. Time-out should end only once the child has been calm and quiet briefly so they learn to associate the end of time out with this desired behavior.
- Return to the task: If time-out was issued for not complying with a task, once it ends the child should be instructed to complete the original task. This way, kids won't begin to see time-outs as an escape strategy

By bringing behavioral tools home, parents can make it a much more peaceful place to be.

ADAPTED from Child Mind Institute