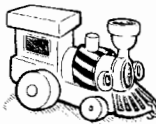


# Child Care plus+

## + Behavior Basics

The early childhood setting is one of the places where children learn about themselves and their world. For many young children, it is their first time away from home and family for large blocks of time as well as their first introduction to learning in a group of peers. Some of their learning opportunities are positive—painting, singing, and riding a tricycle. Other opportunities, like breaking toys, yelling, and hitting, while considered negative, actually serve to help children discover how their behavior affects others. A few basic guidelines about young children's behavior can help you more fully put to use all of these teaching/learning opportunities.



**A) Behavior is anything a child does.** Behavior is action—action that is observable. When a child is building a house out of blocks, the behavior of building is clearly observable by anyone watching the child. When a child is singing, the behavior is singing. When a child is throwing toys, the behavior is throwing toys. Behavior may be action that is either positive or negative, appropriate or inappropriate; it's still just behavior.

**B) Guiding behavior is part of everything you do in an early childhood setting.** Guiding the behavior of young children is often thought of as something that is done *in addition* to planning and implementing daily learning activities and routines. Not true! Children are learners in the social world, and your role is to provide regular, positive support to help each child learn and participate successfully within the context of the group. During small group activities, meal time, outdoor play, rest time, and circle time, you can actively teach children social skills, define limits, and identify appropriate behavior. When children are engaged in painting, swinging, or eating, you can naturally help them learn rules, guidelines, and consequences for their behavior.

**C) Behaviors—those you would like to see more often as well as those you would like to see less often—are learned.** Just as a child learns to walk and talk, biting and yelling are also learned. Interactions between adult and

child primarily determine the type of learning that takes place and influence a child's decision to continue or abandon any one behavior. A child also learns behavior based on interactions with other children and with the environment.

**D) You can help children learn what is appropriate.** Instead of guiding behavior, you may sometimes end up telling children what NOT TO DO. Some people believe that reacting *after* children do something unacceptable is the best way to teach what is right or wrong. While this approach may occasionally stop a problem behavior, it seldom teaches a child what TO DO instead. When told not to do something, a child may resist, repeat the behavior at another time, or continue to take your attention away from other children in your group. A more effective approach is to help children understand what behavior is expected instead of being told what not to do.

**E) It is important to make a distinction between behavior and feelings.** Children's behavior often gets confused with the emotions they seem to be expressing. When a child hits a playmate, the behavior is hitting—not anger. Telling the child to stop hitting does not make her angry. To help a child develop the desire and the skills to change the behavior of hitting, you need to acknowledge the child's feelings first and then help her learn different ways to express them. As she learns satisfactory ways to express her feelings, the hitting will likely stop.

These basic principles form the foundation of a positive behavior guidance approach. With these basics in place, guidance strategies become powerful tools to help children develop the ability to regulate their own behavior. + CC+

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## + IN FOCUS

Some children use behavior that is unusual or different—behavior that most children do not demonstrate. A child who bangs his head against the wall, who makes loud, disturbing sounds, or whose behavior is exceptionally aggressive can present an unusual challenge.

In this case, an individualized, effective approach is needed to help the child learn appropriate behavior while, at the same time, discourage the inappropriate behavior. You may need to work with the parents to make a referral or work closely with the child's existing team to develop an effective plan. Keep in mind the importance of taking immediate action when a child is injuring herself or putting other children/teachers at risk. Immediate, but temporary, modifications might include staffing an additional teacher during the activity or routine that is most difficult for the child, designating one teacher to stay in close proximity to the child, or creating a short-term plan for redirecting other children when the child with the challenging behavior needs personal space. When the immediate risk of serious harm has been addressed, then you can move on to develop and implement a long-term behavior guidance plan. +

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## + TRY IT OUT

Here is a simple strategy that immediately creates a positive climate and increases young children's appropriate behavior. ✘ Set up the learning environment at the end of each day or early in the morning. Be completely prepared before children arrive. ✘ Identify the most frequent arrival time for children. ✘ If you work alone, set up a play area with puzzles, stringing beads, and other small toys near the entry area. This way, children can become engaged in individual or small group activities while remaining in an area you can easily supervise. ✘ If your program has multiple staff, assign one person to the greeting area and a second to supervise the rest of the group at play during the time when most children arrive. ✘ Be in the entry area to warmly greet each child. Get down to eye level with the child. Look at the child; touch the child's shoulder. You might say, "I am so glad to see you today," and tell the child about one or two activities planned for the day. ✘ Tune in to children who arrive later; they need the same friendly welcome as well. ✘ Warmly acknowledge each parent; briefly ask about their day so far. You might ask, "Is there anything I need to know to make your child's day go well?"

This simple greeting routine not only improves children's positive behavior, it can change your perspective about the children and the day together as well. +

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## + CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Every day, you talk with parents about their child's behavior. Remembering the behavior basics will guide your approach to these discussions in a huge way—both what you say and how you say it. When talking about "behavior", you will remember that behavior is the child's actions, separate from the child's feelings. Unless you typically describe behavior this way, it may take practice to talk more about actions and less about feelings. Instead of saying, "Ryan had a good day", you will be more likely to describe his actions: "Ryan told us all about his new puppy during snack and played on the swings when the children were outside today." On the other hand, instead of saying "Ryan had a bad day; he was grumpy and whiny", you will be more likely to say, "Ryan laid on the floor for long periods today and did not eat most of his snack." You will notice that this line of thinking results in the use of more descriptive words and less judgmental language or labels.

Acknowledging and understanding that behavior is learned immediately suggests a problem-solving approach whenever you want to increase or decrease a behavior. You then approach parents with the description of an observable behavior whenever you talk together about their child's development. You and the child's parent(s) become partners in guiding the child's behavior, whatever it may be. Even if it is something as difficult to talk about as cursing or switching to more appropriate language, your discussion will focus on behavior as being learned. You will work together to make a plan for how you will respond when the child uses that type of language, where and when it might be appropriate (if ever), and what type of language you will model for the child as more appropriate in your program. +

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## + PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Let's take a closer look at how children learn behavior by using an example. When a child tips over backward in his chair, the behavior is simply tipping over backward in a chair. The first time a child tips over, he feels the sensation of falling, notes reactions from peers as well as adults, and "learns" that it either is or is not worth doing again. The consequences teach the child how to behave next. If the consequence is rewarding (the teacher draws everyone's attention to "these acrobatics"), and no opportunity is taken to teach the child an alternative appropriate behavior (keep feet on the floor), chances are great that the behavior will be repeated. Likewise, if consequences are not very motivating (he is helped up without a big reaction from the teacher or other children, or he gets hurt), the behavior probably will not be repeated.

### **X Making Sense of Young Children's Behavior**

*What happens before* a particular behavior can give valuable information about why it occurs. You may never know what goes through a child's mind just before he bites, hits, or has a tantrum. You can, however, carefully analyze the situation and decide whether or not there are observable events that trigger or cause the behavior. Your observations may lead you to identify patterns or important events which can be altered. A tantrum may frequently occur a few minutes after rowdy play, or biting may occur when two or three children have only one rolling pin at the play dough table. Behavior is often directly linked to events that can easily be modified, such as providing a calming activity after active play or adding more materials at the play dough table. Noticing *what happens before* the behavior of children in your program is important to understanding more about them and is useful in determining how to begin replacing challenging behaviors with more appropriate behaviors.

*What happens after* a behavior can help you determine what motivates a child to continue or to stop doing it. Paying attention to what happens after the incident also provides you with important clues about what the child is learning about behavior. If a child's acting out can distract the teacher during circle time and even bring an end to circle time, the child has learned what to do in order to stop a group activity. Likewise, if every time a child says "mama," her mother gets excited and smiles and talks to her, the child learns that this is an important word that gets an affectionate response. *What happens after* the behavior is also important in understanding more about the

behavior of the children in your program and is very helpful in determining how to replace challenging behaviors with behaviors more appropriate for group settings.

By working to clearly understand the child's behavior with input from parents and perhaps other program staff, you will discover that behaviors that often seem complex can be unraveled, revealing simple solutions. When you are working to help a child learn new behavior, be sure to allow plenty of time for change. Carefully observe to see what seems to be working. Be patient. Sometimes a new approach may temporarily lead to an *increase* in the behavior before you see any positive results. Be consistent in implementing the plan. Allow 4-6 weeks of consistent implementation before expecting significant and positive behavior change. Be prepared to revisit the plan if it is not working.

### **X Using What You Know About Each Child**

Knowing each child's interests and abilities is essential to your efforts to help individual children learn appropriate behavior. When activities do not meet children's interests or your expectations do not match children's abilities, children may react in inappropriate ways. When you know the child, you are better able to read both the child's subtle and obvious cues. You can then use that information to modify your environment and activities to promote appropriate behavior for that child in a given situation.

For example, when you know from past experience that a particular child is likely to push or hit when other children sit or stand too close, you would make decisions about how to arrange the environment during floor and table activities to help this child have enough space. Possible ideas include putting tape on the floor to define each child's space, moving the blocks to a larger area to keep crowding to a minimum, and including fewer children in circle time. What you know about each child has a dramatic impact on which behavior strategy you use and how you implement it.

Sometimes a behavior is totally expected but is still unacceptable. You might not be surprised, for example, when a toddler bites. Many toddlers experiment with biting as a normal developmental behavior. That does not mean that you must be comfortable with it, but it does mean that you can prepare for this typical behavior. Other behaviors, like cursing, are also fairly typical in the early childhood years but may be of more concern because they are seen as socially inappropriate and reflect on behavior children have observed and are imitating. +

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## + QUESTION

**QUESTION:** *Where is the line between keeping children safe and being physically punishing?*

**ANSWER:** While physical punishment is generally recognized as an unacceptable strategy, other forms of physically correcting a child's behavior can be just as aversive or punishing as spanking or hitting a child. Actions such as grabbing a child's arm, pulling on a child's chin to gain eye contact, or jerking a child back into circle are threatening to children and may escalate conflict. When your goal is to guide children toward acceptable behavior, your methods should also be acceptable and help children feel safe and comfortable—not threatened.

Your actions serve as a model for what you expect to see from children themselves. Suppose a child pushes a playmate down to the ground, and you want the child to learn that pushing a playmate is unacceptable behavior. It would be ridiculous for you to use force to physically place the child who pushed into a timeout or quiet chair and expect the child to learn not to push! Your words and actions should convey a) disappointment that a child was pushed and b) your commitment to the rule that no one gets hurt or feels threatened in your program—including the child who was hurting or threatening another.

At times, it may be necessary to physically intervene for safety reasons, such as moving a child who is about to bite away from a nearby child to prevent injury. In this situation, you must remain calm and use firm physical contact that is not threatening, punitive, or hurtful. It is important to separate the correction, which might include reminding the child that biting is not acceptable and offering something else to bite, such as a teething ring, from the physical contact needed to insure safety. Once

reminded, you can quickly but calmly guide or pick the child up, if necessary, to move her to another area. This way, the child is not threatened by being moved, the situation stays low-key, and your relationship with the child remains positive. This type of calming physical contact helps reassure children, and they are likely to return more easily to acceptable activities. + CC+

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

**Practical Strategies for Guiding the Behavior of Young Children**, offered by Child Care plus+, is an innovative response to the need for training related to guiding the behavior of young children. The 10-week self-study course includes the following components: understanding the rationale for a positive approach to behavior guidance, observation of young children, thirteen strategies for implementation in group settings, and an action plan which facilitates implementation of the strategies. The course satisfies 15 hours of state-approved training (the facilitation fee is \$200) and can be taken for one academic credit (additional \$135). Please call 800-235-4122 or e-mail [ccplus@ruralinstitute.umt.edu](mailto:ccplus@ruralinstitute.umt.edu) for more information.

*CHILD CARE plus+* is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

*CHILD CARE plus+* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$10 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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