

# Child Care plus✦

## + Child Guidance and the Word "No"

If you find that "no" is overused in your program, perhaps it is time to examine your overall behavior guidance approach. A positive child guidance approach in an early childhood setting includes: 1) teachers/caregivers who focus on developing a positive relationship with each child; 2) environment and schedule designed for prevention of inappropriate behavior; 3) support for children's learning to understand and live within program boundaries); and 4) strategies for effectively resolving problems when they occur. When strong prevention and teaching efforts are consistently implemented, time spent resolving problems is small. Even so, a plan is essential; you must be prepared to resolve problems with a range of strategies that fit within the framework of a positive approach and, at the same time, allow for individualizing to meet children's needs.

One strategy for resolving problems is the appropriate use of the word "no." "No" should communicate a powerful message to young children. When a child hears "no," it should give an immediate and urgent message to "Stop what you are doing—NOW!" When reserved as a *rare* but meaningful child guidance strategy, "no" is very effective. Its effectiveness is directly related to the *infrequency* of its use and the adult's consistency in following through.

Sadly, the use of "no" is often an *unplanned* response to children's behavior. If children hear "no" continuously, unwanted outcomes are likely. First, repeated use of "no" contributes to a negative climate. The early childhood environment should be a place where young children are surrounded by learning experiences that nurture and encourage positive behavior. Second, the word "no" simply offers children no information about appropriate behavior. Children depend on clear and consistent teaching to develop the skills they need to successfully participate in the complex social environment of group care and education. The environment should support children in living within the boundaries and rules established in the setting. Third, when children hear the word "no" repeatedly, they learn

### USING "NO"

- + Say the child's name.
- + Firmly say "no."
- + Teach.
- + Follow through.

that it is not an important word, and they are likely to stop paying attention when it is said. Frequent use of the word "no" basically teaches children to ignore it.

So what does the appropriate use of "no" look like? Here are the general guidelines:

A) Whenever you use the word "no," begin by saying the child's name in a firm, non-threatening tone to get the child's attention. Then say "no" in the same tone and add a phrase or statement describing what the child should do. For example, "Ben, no! Scissors are for paper." Your goal is NOT to startle the child or sound threatening but to stop a potentially unsafe behavior.

B) If the same situation occurs again, calmly repeat just the child's name and the teaching statement; leave out the "no." For example, "Ben, scissors are for paper."

C) "No" is most useful when you are unable to gently redirect the child or step between the child and the potential danger or risk. When you use "no," you should simultaneously move toward the child, and be prepared to follow through. Simply remaining at a distance and increasing the volume or intensity of your voice will NEVER succeed as a guidance strategy.

Overuse of the word "no" is most likely to occur when prevention methods are neglected. As a strategy for stopping a behavior, an occasional "no" is helpful. Just remember that it is not a strategy that teaches children about acceptable behavior. + SHW

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## + IN FOCUS

While safety is always a primary goal in early childhood settings, some young children need extra

support to learn to live within the basic safety guidelines. The word "stop" may be a more meaningful and precise form of communicating your intent to a child than the word "no." Whether a child is preparing to jump from the top of the stairs or approaching a peer with an open pair of scissors, "stop" tells him or her precisely what to do. Saying "no" tells the child nothing about what to do and might even be confusing to the child. "Stop" is also a word that has general application; there are stop lights and stop signs everywhere.

The child's name paired with "stop," as in "Amanda, stop!" is especially effective for some children. In a group program, there is a lot of background noise and chatter. You cannot expect a child to listen, even in an emergency, unless you have his or her attention. Saying the name firmly but calmly is one way to be heard.

"Stop" is especially effective when it is followed up by a brief description of what the child could do instead. Once the child has stopped the unsafe behavior, you might say "climbing the fence is not safe; you may climb the ladder on the slide" or "scissors are for paper; let's walk to the table together so you can get some paper."

"No" is more precisely used as the negative of "yes." To the question "can I go now," the answer is "yes" or "no." When Ben bolts into the parking lot, saying "Ben, stop!" tells Ben exactly what he needs to do! + SLM/SHW

## + TRY IT OUT

A number of teachers and caregivers frequently use the word "no" without even realizing they do it. For them, using "no" has essentially become a habit, a spontaneous response whenever they want a child to stop a behavior. They automatically say "no" for almost every situation, whether a child is heading outside before an adult is on the playground or a child is running his truck up the wall.

There are several ways to raise your awareness of your personal use of the word "no":

- ▶ Ask a co-teacher or assistant teacher to count the number of times he or she hears you say the word "no" across part of the day, a whole day, or longer. Have her give you her report at the end of the time.
- ▶ Get a pocket sized notebook to carry around with you and keep your own tally; every time you use the word "no," make a mark in the notebook.
- ▶ Put ten to twenty pennies in your right pocket; every time you say the word "no," move a penny to your left pocket.

You can benefit from seeing for yourself whether you have this habit or not. If you are using the word "no" frequently for minor issues, explore strategies that teach children what is appropriate behavior. If you are using "no" for emergencies only, but still quite frequently, assess your environment and look for better ways to prevent unsafe situations. + SLM

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## + CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Parents and providers share responsibility for keeping young children safe and at the same time allow them to play and explore the sometimes risk-filled world around them. It is important for children to learn that adults are in charge of keeping them safe. Children can be taught to listen and respond quickly whenever they hear words such as "no," "stop," or "wait." You can teach children about these words, about the times when they might be used, and about what you expect of them whenever you use these words. You can help children learn about the types of situations that might arise when you will need to use strong words like these to help them learn and stay safe. You can explain the positive consequences for children who immediately respond whenever you use them.

The hardest thing for most adults to remember is that the power in these words is completely based on their being used only in special circumstances and when they are absolutely necessary. In most circumstances, strategies that emphasize prevention, natural consequences, and teaching specific skills are the logical first choice for helping children learn and internalize appropriate behavior. + SLM

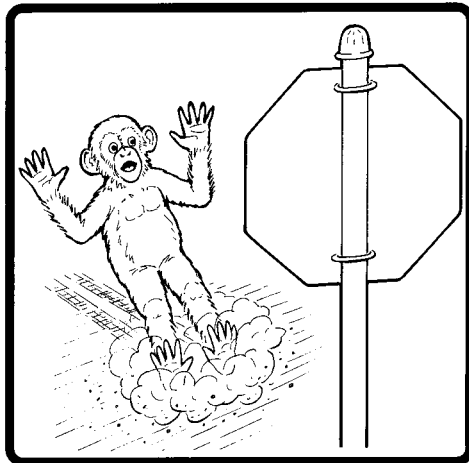
## + PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

The word "no" seems to almost automatically pop out of adult mouths whenever they see a child doing something they do not want the child to do. In an early care and education setting, the word "no" has limited use as a behavior guidance strategy. In the short term, this strategy often stops the child's behavior; in the long term, there are many more effective strategies that stop children's behavior (or teach them) and at the same time, help children learn how to choose appropriate behavior.

Frequent use of "no" is clearly a reactive strategy and not a preventive strategy. Children must be actively taught appropriate behavior in a nurturing learning environment, not just told to stop whenever they make the mistake of using inappropriate behavior.

**Too much use of the word "no" creates a negative learning climate.** "No" is often said in a scolding tone of voice and with a frown on the face. In fact, many adults repeat the word to emphasize the intensity of the command by saying, "no, no" or "no, no, no!" Sometimes the word is accompanied by a flurry of activity as the adult swoops down on the child to take away the toy or grab the child's hand. Whether the child being scolded reacts or not, other children can become alarmed or upset by this approach. This intensity may be warranted in an emergency situation when children's safety is at stake, but it is an over reaction and misuse of "no" in most situations.

**The power of "no" is lost through constant repetition.** Using "no" may stop a behavior once or twice, but it loses its effectiveness over time. When "no" is applied to practically every situation that arises, its value as a powerful word is completely lost. Ironically, this may lead to more emphatic use of the word, that is, saying it louder and more forcefully until you are practically yelling at the child. In fact, when adults primarily use a negative approach with infants and young children and the overall tone of the program becomes "crabby and cross." In this type of environment, the word "no" simply blends into the negative scenery and becomes even less effective.



**"No" should be reserved for emergency situations.**

This powerful word is best used sparingly and only at those rare times when it is *of primary importance to stop the child's behavior*. You might use "no" when a child is just about to cross the street in front of a car, hit or bite a playmate, or touch something very hot. In these situations, you must preserve the safety and well-being of the child before you can provide any guidance about more acceptable behavior. You do not need such an emphatic message when the child is putting shoes on the wrong feet or hiding blocks under the table. These situations beg for other corrective strategies.

Use "no" when you must first stop the child's behavior so you can move to a safe point for teaching a better alternative. Most of the time and in most situations, teaching children acceptable behavior is the first and best plan. However, there are times when a child needs to hear a quick strong message to stop. This is when using "no" as the first choice is a very good idea.

**Use "no" when you are prepared to follow through to make sure that the behavior is immediately stopped.** Every time you use this strategy you should be moving toward the child and prepared to follow up (move the child away from the curb, pick up the child, or direct the child to a safer activity) to be sure that the behavior is stopped. Children will quickly learn that you mean it when each time they hear "no," you work hard to ensure that the behavior has been successfully interrupted. Do not use this strategy when the behavior is not important enough to stop immediately or when you are unable to interrupt what you are doing to help the child stop the behavior.

Children's use of inappropriate or challenging behavior gives teachers and caregivers an opportunity to do what they do best, help children learn and grow. The term "teachable moment" was coined to describe just such a golden opportunity. Although you have already said "no," you can now teach the child the knowledge and skills he or she needs to "try again." + CC+/SHW

## + QUESTION

**QUESTION:** How does using the word "no" apply to guiding behavior in infant and toddler programs?

**ANSWER:** It is in infant/toddler programs that this intervention strategy is most useful. On the other hand, it is in the infant/toddler setting where the word "no" is most likely to be over used! While over use of this strategy often results from caregivers' sincere efforts to guide children's emerging sense of self and growing independence, it can also indicate that teaching and prevention strategies have been neglected. When you pay attention to the times you most use "no," you will find clues to minor changes that could have a major impact.

As toddlers develop mobility, their curiosity and need to explore can lead to unsafe interactions with each other and with the environment. While this seems obvious, unsafe interactions are rare in a quality program. Quality infant/toddler programs provide alert and constant supervision; even the adult/child ratio is higher than it is for preschool age children to allow for this necessity. Quality programs provide a safe and nurturing physical environment that allows for active exploration and rich play; caregivers are appropriately trained in child development and developmentally appropriate practice and provided with necessary resources. In quality programs, caregivers partner with parents and other professionals to ensure that each child's interests and needs are consistently addressed.

With effective teaching and prevention strategies in

place, occasional use of "no" has a powerful and positive effect on children's learning and self-regulation. When the care and education setting is filled with interesting and age-appropriate toys, play materials, and activities, this strategy will rarely need to be used. + SLM

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

For more information about practical strategies that support a nurturing and positive approach to guiding young children's behavior, order *Guiding the Behavior of Young Children*. This booklet is available for \$10 from Child Care plus+ (see contact info below).

Additional strategies for guiding the behavior of young children can be downloaded from past Child Care plus+ newsletters at [www.ccplus.org](http://www.ccplus.org). +

*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.

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