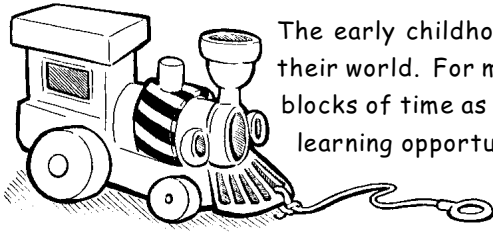


Behavior Basics



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.

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.

A Child Care Provider's 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.

