

Braking Our Impulses: Shifting Gears to Positive Discipline

by Karen Stephens

Having trouble finding positive ways to deal with negative behaviors? Difficult behaviors can stump even the most seasoned teachers. But take heart, here's some food for thought!

If you stumble in your early attempts to shift gears to positive discipline, don't give in to discouragement! No one technique works effectively with every child. In fact (just to complicate matters), you're not even guaranteed that one technique will work with the same child twice in a row! Children are stubbornly individual, and that's what makes them so interesting to be around! Becoming skilled in positive guidance requires experience as well as training. Give yourself plenty of both, and you will become adept at positively managing children's behavior.

When addressing behavior problems, examine what a child can learn from the situation. Focus on the behaviors you hope will occur as the result of appropriate guidance. To effectively do this, you must maintain self-control. This will help you keep a clear head which will aid in problem solving. Look at the problem from the child's point of view as well as from your own. This may shed light on the cause for the inappropriate behavior. The child's motivation may also help determine the type of guidance technique you will use.

Following are typical scenarios observed in early childhood settings. Names have been omitted to protect the innocent (and the guilty). All are examples of teacher behavior that focus more on punishing, threatening, or demeaning children than

on supporting their social, emotional, or intellectual growth.

As you read each scenario, analyze why the teacher's reaction may be detrimental in terms of child development. After doing this, read the suggested alternatives for teacher behavior. Why would their use be more beneficial to children? Try to think of other ways to positively handle each situation. There is never only one right way to guide children's behavior. In fact, creativity is a great asset when using positive discipline!

Scenario 1

It's a half hour before lunch. The children have been inside all morning. Despite frequent reminders to "Stop getting out of your chairs," 14 three year olds have been up and down, in and out, and all around their chairs during an art project. They wander aimlessly, bumping into each other — causing outbursts of tears whenever someone's paint cup is toppled. Several children play chase around the area and end up pushing each other onto the floor (this is not a pretty sight). The teacher finally has enough and tells the children they behaved badly during the art activity so they will not get to play outside that day. She then tells the children to sit down and put their head on the table for 20 minutes. (%\$#@^&!)

Alternatives to try:

Focus on PREVENTION. Plan an art activity that will keep the children's attention. (This will require reviewing art resource books.)

○ Conduct art activities in smaller groups than 14. Perhaps a volunteer can be recruited so the class can be divided into two small groups. One group could be playing outside while the other participates in the art project.

Plan a more balanced daily schedule so large motor activities can be offered earlier in the morning. Young children need ample opportunity to expend energy through movement.

Express your feelings and clearly state expectations. "I'm frustrated when you don't listen to my words. I expect you to sit in your chair while doing your art project."

State options. "If you choose not to complete an art project, you may clear your space and quietly read a book until it is time to go outside."

Empathize: "Seems like you kids have a lot of energy today. You'll be glad when it's time to go outside! We are almost finished with this activity."

Scenario 2

○ Three five year olds repeatedly stand in the way as Amanda (also five) tries to drive her Big Wheel around the trike path. A teacher storms over to the children and says, "You know better than that. Do you always have to be such bullies? Go sit in your cubbies until you can behave the way you should."

Alternatives to try:

Recognize this is typical behavior for five year olds. Analyze the situation for the learning opportunities it holds. Encourage Amanda to stand up for herself: "Amanda, it must be frustrating to have them block your path. Can you tell them how you feel about it?" Stand nearby to support Amanda in communicating her feelings. (Your mere presence will ensure that the children listen to her.)

Reinforce Amanda's position: "Children, the trike path is for wheeled toys. The grassy area is for people to stand on."

Provide information: "You three could get hurt if you stand in front of moving Big Wheels. Your bodies will be safer in the grassy area."

○ Pose a reasonable consequence: "If you choose to tease Amanda, I will ask you to find another

play area. Amanda does not deserve to be teased."

Scenario 3

Out of the corner of his eye, the teacher sees four year old Cindy hit Jerome with a block and then knock his building down. The teacher yells across the room, "Cindy, tell him you are sorry. Go on, tell him." Cindy remains silent. "All right, if you aren't going to say it, you'll just have to sit down until you do. It's going to be a long time before your mother picks you up."

Alternatives to try:

Tell Cindy she needs to listen to Jerome's feelings about his block building being knocked down. Stand nearby as Jerome tries to express himself.

Matter of factly state the function of the play materials: "Cindy, the blocks are for building. You may not hit other people with them."

Suggest ways for Cindy to make amends: "I expect you to help Jerome pick up the blocks from his building. When you aren't angry anymore, Jerome might like to hear if you are sorry."

Prompt Cindy on self-control: "If you are angry with Jerome, you may use your words to tell him. I want all children to be safe in our classroom, so you may not use blocks to hit others."

State consequences: "Cindy, if I can't trust you not to hit with blocks, you will lose the privilege of playing in the block area this morning." (And, yes, you can use a big word like privilege with some fours. They learn what it means through context.)

Scenario 4

During free-play two schoolagers begin having a tug-of-war over a red crayon. The teacher enters and takes the crayon away, saying, "If you can't play nicely, neither of you will get to use the red crayon."

Alternatives to try:

Provide information: "If you need more crayons, all you need to do is ask me for more."

Initiate problem solving: "Sounds like there is an argument here. Who can tell me what the problem

Beginnings

Beginnings

is?” In this case, the problem was both children wanted to draw an apple tree and needed the red crayon. Once the problem was identified, the teacher moved onto brainstorming options. The children generated several options: split the crayon in two; trade back and forth periodically; get more red drawing utensils, i.e. red pencil or marker; etc. Once options were identified, the children reached consensus regarding the best solution. In this case, the solution was to use green, yellow, AND red for apples since the flavorful fruit comes in three different colors! Now that’s creative problem solving!

Scenario 5

Anthony, a two year old, pulls Jessica’s hair. The teacher sharply grabs Anthony’s hand, smacks it in an exaggerated slapping motion, and repeats, “Bad boy, bad boy. Anthony is being a bad boy.”

Alternatives to try:

Show empathy for Jessica FIRST: Kneel beside Jessica. Hold her close if possible. Rub her head gently and say, “I’m sorry you are upset. It really hurts when your hair is pulled.”

To model compassion, explain Jessica’s reaction to Anthony: “Anthony, look at Jessica’s face. She has tears on her cheeks. It really hurts when you pull her hair. It’s not okay to pull people’s hair.”

Redirect behavior. “Anthony, you may not pull Jessica’s hair. It hurts her. Here, if you want to pull on something, you may use this play dough. It stretches long when you pull on it.”

Anticipate: If Anthony is a notorious hair puller, try to identify the times of days, or the situations, which are most likely associated with hair pulling. Supervise him VERY carefully at those times. Encourage him to engage in solitary activity if he shows signs of *overloading* from too much peer interaction or frustration.

Scenario 6

Preschooler Miranda has been reminded to put on her coat; regardless, she still goes outside without it. The teacher responds, “You get back in there and get that coat on! Why are you being such a space cadet today? If you don’t get your coat right now, I’m

going to tell your daddy tonight. He’ll give you what for if you don’t listen to me.”

Alternatives to try:

Restate expectations: “Miranda, I expect you to get your coat on now. It is not a choice whether you wear a coat or not. When it is this chilly, you must wear a coat.”

State reasons for the rule: “Miranda, when you don’t wear a coat in chilly weather you are more likely to get sick. I want you to be well. I expect you to go inside and put on your coat.”

Express your feelings: “Miranda, I’m really tired of reminding you to get your coat. I feel like you are ignoring me and it makes me feel unimportant. Now, it is your responsibility to go in and put on your coat before coming outside to play.”

Enforce a consequence: “Miranda, if you don’t wear a coat, you will not be allowed to play outside.”

Attempt to problem solve: “Miranda, I’m wondering why you don’t want to wear your coat. Is it hard to put on? Is the zipper broken? Is it too tight?” If this is the case, work to remedy the situation.

Scenario 7

During music time, four year old Marguerite wiggles around and tries to crawl under a nearby table. The teacher pleads with her, “Pleeease behave, Marguerite. If you don’t sing along, you’ll just have to go home. I think I’ll ask the secretary to call your mommy right now.”

Alternatives to try:

Redirect and generate enthusiasm: “Marguerite, would you be the leader in our next song? It’s a marching song!”

State limits: “Marguerite, during music we sit around the red circle. You may not climb under the table.”

Try prevention: Go to the library and find some new songs and fingerplays so children are not bored with the same old ones.

Be specific: “Marguerite, I expect you to behave. That means your body should be sitting

up straight and your eyes should be looking at me.”

Scenario 8

Energetic Angelic and Vlad are running around the room, giggling as they try to tag each other. The teacher says, “Quiet down, you two. Quit acting like a couple of wild animals.”

Alternatives to try:

Make a non-judgmental observation: “It seems like you two have a lot of energy to run off today. Where is a better place to do that?”

Be tolerant: “It’s fun to chase each other sometimes.”

Provide choices: “I know you are having fun, but I’m afraid you might bump into a table edge while running inside. Would you like to play tag outside or climb on the indoor climbing gym?”

Become involved: “Hey, I’d love to play chase, too. Let’s go outside where we’ll have more room!”

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Resources for Teachers and Parents

selected by Karen Stephens

Positive Discipline, Jane Nelson, Ballantine Books, 1981.

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, Avon Books, 1980.

Siblings Without Rivalry, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, W. W. Norton, 1987.

Please Don’t Sit on the Kids, Clare Cherry, Fearon Pitman, 1983.

Raising Your Spirited Child, Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, Harper Collins, 1991.

Guidance of Young Children, Marian Marion, Merrill, 1991.

A Guide to Discipline, Jeannette Galambos Stone, NAEYC, 1978.

Know Your Child, Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas, Basic Books, 1987.

Guiding Young Children: A Child-Centered Approach, Eleanor Reynolds, Mayfield, 1990.

Kids Can Cooperate: A Practical Guide to Teaching Problem Solving, Elizabeth Crary, Parenting Press, 1984.

A Very Practical Guide to Discipline With Young Children, Grace Mitchell, Telshare, 1982.

Helping Your Child Handle Stress, Katharine Kersey, Acropolis Books, 1986.

The Hurried Child, David Elkind, Addison-Wesley, 1981.

Listen to My Feelings, Ruth Reardon, C. R. Gibson Co., 1992.

Listening to the Littlest, Ruth Reardon, C. R. Gibson Co., 1984.

Your Child’s Self Esteem, Dorothy Corkill Briggs, Dolphin Books, 1970.

Self-Esteem: A Family Affair, Jean Illsley Clarke, Winston Press, 1978.

Self-Esteem: 101 Ways to Help Children Like Themselves, Michele and Craig Borba, Winston Press, 1978.

Video for Early Childhood Professionals

“Appropriate Guidance,” NAEYC #855.