
Responding to Challenging Behaviors of School-Aged Children at Home and/or Childcare Settings

Purpose

This document is intended to provide families and childcare providers with resources for responding to children who struggle with social and emotional learning. Children and Youth who experience strong feelings or are delayed in their social learning sometimes express their frustrations in the form of challenging behaviors. Children and youth also pick up on the anxiety of the adults around them and are not immune to the stress felt by our current place in history. The concepts outlined here are meant to supply families and childcare providers with some tools for supporting such children and youth.

Additional information about Continuity of Learning guidelines for families and guardians can be found in [Continuity of Learning: Guidelines for Families and Guardians of PK-5 Students](#) and [Continuity of Learning: Guidelines for Families and Guardians of Students in Grades 6-12](#).

The Importance of Routines

Keeping a regular schedule provides a sense of control, predictability, calm, and well-being for children and youth. It stands to reason, then, that changes in routine can be stressful. School provides a good deal of structure for children, so setting up a regular schedule at home or at childcare while schools are closed and stay at home orders have been issued can help with this transition.

Involving your children in creating daily routines for this “new normal” can help them become more invested and agreeable. Posting a schedule where they can see it helps them know what to expect next and builds independence.

Flexibility is also important, especially now. Building in breaks, down-time, play-time, and connecting as a group is just as important for your child’s well-being as continuing their academic learning.

For ideas about how to structure a daily routine during a period of school closure, see the references at the end of this document.

PBIS for Home and Childcare

Positive Behavior Supports and Interventions (PBIS) is a framework used in many Vermont schools to support all students and to achieve positive outcomes for all. PBIS is backed by research and often results in fewer discipline referrals.

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An essential part of PBIS is teaching and practicing pro-social behavior. When clear expectations about how students are expected to behave and then taught and practiced, the school has developed a system to acknowledge those positive behaviors.

PBIS practices can be used in other environments, like home and childcare, as well. As is often the case, what is helpful for students who struggle is also helpful for all children. Using this framework for an entire household or childcare setting can contribute to an improved climate in which positive behaviors are spotlighted. Strategies and tools for doing so are included in the resources section of this document.

Catch Them Being Good

Acknowledging positive behavior is a very effective way to “shape” (slowly change) a child’s behavior. Children who struggle to manage their feelings, thoughts and behaviors have probably been given a lot of reprimands in their lives and they may have grown to take any type of corrective feedback as a personal attack on them.

Researchers report that for every instance of negative feedback, adults should provide praise 4-6 times. Look for times when the child is following a rule, staying on task, showing kindness, sharing, etc. and offer positive feedback each time you see it happen.

- Verbal praise should be specific. Briefly describe to the child what you saw and heard so they know exactly what they did positively.
 - Ex: “Wow, you picked up your art supplies before you came for lunch! I appreciate that.” as opposed to “Good job.”
- Other ways of acknowledging positive behavior might include the following
 - High fives or pats on the back
 - Thumbs up or a smile
 - Using the child’s behavior as a model for others
 - Ex: “Did everyone notice how Johnnie picked up his art supplies before he came to lunch? That’s a very responsible thing to do!”
 - A special thank you note to the child at the end of the day
 - An award or certificate hanging on the refrigerator
 - Earned activities or privileges

Some children need more than praise or acknowledgement and those strategies can be found in the resource sections for ABCs of Behavior and Individual Behavior Plans.

Planned Ignoring of Low-Level Behaviors

Sometimes children act out to get attention. In their way of thinking, perhaps, any type of attention (positive or negative) is better than no attention. With this in mind, there are some situations in which it might make sense not to accidentally “reward” a child with your attention (in the form of a reminder/warning/negative feedback) if they are not meeting expectations. By intentionally ignoring certain behaviors, the child may eventually just stop. In order to use this technique, two important things need to be considered.

First, it will be important to decide whether the problem behavior is something you and others can live with. Is it harmful in any way? Is it disrupting the learning and teaching of others? If not, and if the behavior is something you are willing to tolerate, planned ignoring can be a useful tool.

Secondly, it is very important to pair the planned ignoring with praise when the behavior stops or when the child substitutes a better behavior for the problematic one. For example, a child who continually repeats a silly or inappropriate phrase might be annoying but if you and the other children can tolerate it, the child will most likely stop when they see no reactions from others. When they do stop, or if they begin humming quietly instead of repeating the silly phrase, the adult should promptly offer praise such as, “Oh, I love it when you’re working quietly so the rest of us can concentrate.”

Reminders

Everyone makes mistakes, especially when learning new behaviors and skills. When a child shows problem behaviors, a friendly reminder may prompt them to think about what is expected and offer them a chance to self-correct.

At the first sign of misbehavior, it is important to respond quickly but in a gentle and caring way, as mentioned above, to give the child an opportunity to correct themselves. If they do so, a quick “thank you” or thumbs up will reinforce them for changing their behavior. This is an educational approach (as opposed to a punitive response) to helping a child learn to behave appropriately.

It should be only after the child fails to correct themselves that warnings, firm limits, or consequences be applied.

The ABC’s of Behavior

Knowing what might be causing a child’s behavior and what keeps it going can be powerful information because if we know WHY a child is behaving in a certain way, we can structure their world differently to change that. What follows is a simplified explanation of what causes behaviors. In the resources section, you will find information on how you can support children in changing their behavior.

- **A = Antecedent**
 - Antecedents are the things that happen before a problem behavior is shown.
 - It’s helpful to look back at what happens right before a child acts out. You may discover patterns and by recognizing those patterns, you might be able to avoid the problem behaviors.
 - Example: When Susie is asked to do something that’s difficult for her, she typically has an outburst. For Susie, math is especially hard.
 - Example: If you’ve noticed that math is hard for Susie and she often shows problem behavior at that time, you might put some supports in place for math

time (ex: starting off with easier math problems, then getting progressively more difficult; doing the first few math problems with her; allowing her to do the math in a different way; offering her a short break when she completes half of her assignment)

- **B = Behavior**

- We often talk about a behavior we want to discourage, but we can also look at it as behaviors we want to encourage
- Example: When Susie is asked to do something that's difficult for her, she typically yells and then runs away from the group. We'd like to discourage that.
- Example: When Susie is asked to do something that's difficult for her, wouldn't it be nice if she could use some strategies to self-regulate? Maybe taking deep breaths might help. Maybe simply asking for help and receiving it might help.

- **C = Consequence**

- A consequence is anything, positive or negative, that follows the behavior
- What happens immediately after a child shows a behavior can affect the likelihood of the behavior continuing
- Example: When Susie is asked to do something that's difficult for her (like math), she usually yells and runs away. Susie's caretaker typically follows her, kneels down at her level, and offers her comfort. But Susie continued to do this day after day at math time.
 - Sometimes adults "reward" the wrong behavior. In this case, if Susie was looking for attention and comfort all along, she was getting that by yelling and running.
- Example: When Susie yells and runs away, her caretakers intentionally ignored that behavior. Eventually, Susie then returned to the group.
 - Susie returning to the group indicates that she most likely is looking for attention and support from her caregiver. When her caregivers "rewarded" her for returning to the group by praising and comforting her once she returned, she will gradually learn that she doesn't need to act up to get that attention.

As mentioned above, the resource section of this document provides guidance on how to systematically use the ABC's of Behavior to create simple plans for teaching children more desirable behaviors and decreasing their problem behaviors.

Considering Child Temperament

We all have different temperaments or traits that affect how we interact with the world around us. Sometimes one or another of us may be described as "easy" or "difficult" to get along with;

shy; highly energetic; etc. Scientists have identified nine child temperaments. By understanding each child's temperament(s), family members and childcare providers gain better insight in how to match their way of interacting to each child's temperament.

Reframing negative traits into positive ones can also have a beneficial effect on a child's self-esteem. When interacting with a child who might be considered to be "stubborn," for example, adults might use the word "persistent" or "determined" instead and then point out all of the positive aspects of being persistent or determined. At the same time, adults might then set that persistent child up for success by giving the child the power to make their own choices about how or when they complete tasks that then might have been "stubbornly" unwilling to do. For more information about the different types of child temperament and strategies for interacting with children of specific temperaments, see the resources section of this document.

Individual Behavior Plans

If a child is on their own behavior plan at school, then you can ask the child's teacher or special educator how that behavior plan might work at home or at childcare. Individual behavior plans use the same principles described above in the ABCs of Behavior, but they are individualized to suit the unique needs of your child. Again, it is within your rights to ask the child's teacher or special educator to modify that plan for home/childcare, to spend time with you to explain how to use it, and to provide you some of the materials (ex: checklists) to use the plan.

Coping with Stress

Staying home and staying safe is what is needed in our communities right now to slow the spread of the coronavirus outbreak. This change in lifestyle can cause stress for children and adults alike. We all may feel socially isolated from friends, tension among family members can increase, and worries about our own health and wellbeing are likely to surface. Being mindful of three things can be helpful for families at this time.

- Health and Wellness
 - Plan physical activities
 - Maintain a healthy food, sleep, and hygiene habits
 - Stick to family routines as best as you can
 - Practice being patient with one another
 - Use relaxation techniques to manage stress
- Open Communication
 - Explain COVID 19 in a way that your children will understand, along with the reasons for staying home
 - Remind them that things will return to "normal" over time
 - Encourage your children to express their concerns and ask questions
 - Limit exposure to media
- Get Help When Needed
 - Find ways to stay connected with friends and loved ones as a source of support
 - Don't hesitate to call your/your child's doctor if you are concerned about health

- Know that mental health agencies in your area remain open for helping families address anxiety and depression.

Resources:

The Importance of Routines:

- [Creating Routines for Love and Learning](#)
- [Why Kids Need Routines](#)
- [Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules](#)

PBIS at Home:

- [Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support](#)
- [Encourage Your Children's Positive Behavior and School Success](#)
- [PBS Home Matrix \(blank template\)](#)
- [PBS Home Matrix \(example\)](#)
- [Athlos P.B.I.S. at Home \(example\)](#)

Catch Them Being Good:

- [Positive Praise](#)
- [Using Praise to Encourage Good Behaviors](#)
- [Parents: How to Use Labeled Praise](#)
- [The Best Way to Praise Kids Who Learn and Think Differently](#)

Planned Ignoring:

- [Ignore](#)
- [Planned Ignoring](#)
- [How to Handle Your Child's Misbehavior](#)

Reminders:

- [Pre-correcting and Prompting: An Evidence-Based Behavior Strategy](#)
- [Better Behavior Through Precorrection, Prompts, and Specific Praise](#)
- [Setting the Standard \(video\)](#)
- [A Complete Guide for Using Prompts To Teach Individuals With Special Needs](#)

The ABCs of Behavior:

- [Understanding Behavior: ABC's of Behavior \(video\)](#)
- [Observing Behavior Using A-B-C Data](#)
- [Kara on Instagram: "Do you know your ABCs \(of behavior\)? Do your fellow teachers, aides, and parents? As Special educators, we make learning accessible for our..."](#)

- [Antecedents – Behavior – Consequence \(ABC's\)](#)

Considering Temperament:

- [Understanding Your Child's Temperament](#)
- [How to Understand Your Child's Temperament](#)
- [Temperament: what it is and why it matters](#)

Coping with Stress:

- [Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
- [Finding the Right Words to Talk with Children and Teens About Coronavirus](#)
- [Discussing Coronavirus with Your Children](#)