

## Inspiring Good Behavior

### Helping Preschool Children Develop Self-Discipline

During the preschool years, children enjoy being "grown up" and take much pride in their accomplishments. Friendships develop and children become better at taking turns and sharing. When small problems occur, young children can often resolve the issue without intervention. But sometimes, like people of all ages, preschoolers have difficulty controlling their strong emotions and act out inappropriately. Thankfully, with loving support and guidance, most children can learn to become more rational, patient, and self-controlled as they make decisions and solve problems.

The process of learning self-discipline is linked closely to children's relationships with others and how they feel about themselves. It is also important to help children develop their ability to determine for themselves what is right and wrong. When children feel good about themselves, have positive peer and adult relationships, and know which good behavior is expected and which inappropriate behavior is unacceptable, they are well on their way to becoming productive, self-disciplined individuals.

"Ironically, the best time to implement an intervention from problem behavior is when no problem behavior is occurring." (Carr et al., 2002)



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### Strategies to Prevent Problem Behavior from Occurring in the Classroom

A good way to start helping young children develop self-discipline is to establish individual supports as well as group supports. Many researchers, including McCart and Turnbull offer strategies such as the following to consider (2002).

- Keep the day interesting with a variety of engaging, productive activities.
- Teach children new social-emotional skills, such as how to play friendly at recess.
- Warn ahead to make transitions easier. Add extra prompts prior to situations in which problem behavior is likely to occur.
- Intersperse easy tasks with more difficult ones.
- Arrange the classroom environment to promote positive interaction.
- Carefully and vigilantly supervise the children.
- Establish a predictable schedule.

- Be persistent. Reward desirable behavior and discourage inappropriate behavior.
- Be consistent. Learning often takes repeated experiences.
- Emphasize the positive rather than the negative when telling children the right thing to do.
- Model desired behavior and help children monitor their success.

### Some Typical Difficulties and Positive Solutions

In her brochure *Positive Guidance for Young Children*, Alice Honig offers positive solutions for some typical problems (2000).

- **Tension/Frustration** Children who feel under pressure or frustration may show signs of tension such as stuttering and nail biting. Find situations in which these children can succeed and build confidence when praised.
- **Anger/Hitting** Children who have been shouted at or physically punished may direct this same anger toward others. If hitting occurs stop the physical contact and explain that the child may not hit others. Acknowledge children's strong feelings once they have calmed down. Talk over their problems to find reasonable solutions.
- **Fears** Real and imagined fears are very real to young children. Fears are an outward sign of an inner insecurity that needs calmness and honesty from adults. Be sensitive by reassuring children to help them cope with imaginary fears. Prepare children for real, potentially frightening experiences before they occur by talking, reading, or acting them out.
- **Taking from Others** When children intentionally take something that is not theirs, it may be a sign they need more attention. When children feel lonely, resentful, or jealous, they crave any attention, even unpleasant attention. Figure out why a child is taking what doesn't belong to him or her. Once the needs are met, this behavior will most likely end.



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## **When Should a Teacher Intervene?**

A teacher's goal is to teach children how to problem-solve independently. However, there are times when an adult must intervene, such as when someone is getting hurt or property is being destroyed. If trouble is brewing, you should take action before the child does. Children must learn that aggression has consequences (Berkowitz, 1993). Following are some effective intervention strategies:

### **Six Steps of Intervention**

1. Warn the child and redirect. Help the child understand that he or she has the choice to redirect, but if he or she chooses to continue, you'll carry out your warning.
2. Remove the child if he or she persists on doing what is unacceptable. Act calmly and keep the child with you, telling him or her that the privilege of doing the activity is lost.
3. Discuss feelings and rules when the child is calm. The child won't have to show you how he or she feels if it is said.
4. Involve the child in the decision of when to go back. Taking responsibility for behavior instills self-control.
5. Help the child be successful when he or she does return so unacceptable behavior can be replaced with the acceptable. Congratulate the child after he or she has settled down.
6. If the child returns to misbehaving, go through the steps again. If he or she still misbehaves, choose another place to play (The Whole Child, 1998).

It is wonderful when we can rely on children to do the right thing simply because they want to do it. When certain childhood behaviors become challenging and overwhelming, rather than solely enforcing punishment, try to instill in children a sense of self-discipline. Teaching self-discipline using problem-solving strategies builds character and helps children learn to make responsible choices. When no one is watching, it is self-discipline that influences children to behave in a way that will make them feel proud of themselves.

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