

## Promoting positive behaviour in young children

### Guidance for parents

Children love and need our time and attention. How we respond to them can be a powerful way to shape their behaviour. We will all, at times, need to consider what messages we are giving children. Are we being consistent? Are we giving them more attention for desirable behaviour or for undesirable behaviour? Do they know and understand what is expected of them? The strategies below may help you to give them the guidance and boundaries that they need.

- **The whole family agrees a set of rules and expectations.** When you do this, ensure that you listen to the children's views. The rules that you all agree to can then be followed by everyone. Once in place, these rules become agreed expectations and when children push the boundaries, they can be reminded of the agreed rules. When finalising the rules, use positive wording. For example, instead of 'Don't run inside' use 'We walk inside.' Instead of 'Don't interrupt' use 'We listen when others speak.' This ensures that they know what they *should* do. The rules can be tailored to tackle the current challenges and can be regularly reviewed by everyone. Simple drawings alongside the written rules can serve as a visual reminder for pre-readers and allowing them to decorate the 'rules' poster helps them to feel part of the process
- **Use labelled praise to encourage desirable behaviours.** This requires you to be very specific. 'Good girl' or 'Well done' can have little meaning unless you explain what you are pleased with. Instead, use labelled praise, for example 'I am pleased that you wiped your feet when you came in. Well done!' Don't forget to praise effort as well as achievement, for example 'Wow, I am so pleased with you. You really tried to put your coat on by yourself. You only needed a little help and if you keep trying you will soon be able to do it without any help.'
- **Use attention to encourage desirable behaviours.** There are times when we see our children playing happily and being kind to each other and we naturally see this as an opportunity to complete a few jobs 'while they are quiet.' In fact, you can give really positive messages if you give them your attention at these times. It is also good for you to enjoy being with them at these moments, rather than returning when the moment has passed to 'dish out the discipline'. Remember to tell them why you have chosen to join them: 'You were playing so nicely, I just wanted to join in.' This will help them to understand.
- **'Catch them being good'** Sometimes when battles are in full flow, it is better to step back and wait for the moment when there is a pause or when you see some positive behaviour, even if only a glimmer. At this moment, quickly respond with positive comments and attention, to stop the cycle.
- **Praising others.** Giving attention to another child who is behaving as you wish can encourage the struggling child to follow. For example, 'Well done Bill for getting

dressed all by yourself without a fuss. I am proud of you for being so grown up.’ – the second child might see that he will get positive attention if he does the same.

- **Allow extra time in your routines to break bad habits.** It is hard to be consistent if you are under time pressures. When you decide that you want to change a cycle of behaviour, give yourself extra time because it will take time! Morning routines are especially tricky if you know that you have to be at work/school on time and it is often easier to ‘give in’ rather than be late. This gives confusing messages to children, including ‘If I keep saying no, they will do it for me in the end.’
- **Distract!** Stop the cycle by distracting – make them laugh, talk about something different, spot an aeroplane and wonder where it is going.....
- **No labels, just choices.** When children see themselves as ‘naughty’, it can make them feel that there is no way out of the cycle. They need help to understand that it is the behaviour that you dislike, not the child. Explain that you love them and always will. Tell them that you know that they understand the rules but that you feel upset/cross/sad when they choose not to follow them. As they get used to this, they will be able to identify times when they make good or bad choices and this will help them to take responsibility for their behaviour.
- **Giving time warnings.** Imagine you are reading a book, you have a few pages left in the chapter and you really want to know what will happen next. How would you respond if someone said, ‘Stop. Put your book away. We are going now’? Always give children time warnings when you need them to do something. This gives them time to finish what they are doing and prepare themselves for the change.
- **Avoiding the ‘no’ moments.** Young children often say no when asked to do something and this can become the start of a battle. Using guided choices can avert the crisis: ‘Shall we walk or run to the shops?’, ‘Would you like to go to the toilet on your own or shall I come with you?’, ‘Are you going to wear your blue coat or your green coat?’ This approach gives them a little control but helps you to achieve what you need to as well.
- **First and then/When and then.** It can be difficult for a child to change their plans or routines but there are some things that just have to be done! You can help your child to understand this by using first and then (or when and then), which can be reinforced with pictures if needed. For example, ‘First you wash your hands, then you can have something to eat’ or ‘When you have had a bath, then we can have a story.’ This approach can provide an incentive for completing the first task and shows your child that you understand that they have their own plans and that you are not trying to stop them from doing these. Once again, you are giving them a little control and choice.
- **Sanctions** We have all, at some point said something along the lines of ‘Right. That’s it. We won’t go on holiday then’ but in reality we know that we are not going to cancel a much needed holiday (or a party or anything else) just because a child won’t put on their shoes! It is important that we use sanctions that we can put into action so that the child begins to learn that choices have consequences. Any sanctions that you choose should help your child to understand that because they did ‘X’, they will not be allowed to do ‘Y’ and this should be discussed so that they can make better choices next time.

- **Reflection time or time out** There are times when situations need to be diffused quickly, for safety or to break the cycle of behaviour. Reflection time (or time out) can be an effective response at these times. This should be discussed with the children at a calm time and it can be linked to the family rules. When you decide where children are to spend their reflection time, you should make sure that toys and distractions are not available so that they can really focus on the reflection process. Children must understand how they are expected to behave in their reflection time and why 'time to think' is important. It can be a brief time away from others but close enough to you to be sure of safety, followed by a discussion about choices and how behaviour can be modified, when you feel that the time is right. If there is a 'victim' as a result of the poor behaviour, it is essential that the victim is given more attention than the reflecting child as this again gives the message that making poor choices does not secure adult attention.
- **Rewards** We have already discussed how children's behaviour is closely linked to their need for attention and often the best reward for desirable behaviour can be your time. Immediate praise and affirmation given directly to them can be very effective. Perhaps you could also share it with school staff or other family members, when the children are with you, so that they know how much you value their efforts and achievements. For some children a smile and a thumbs up can go a long way! Sticker charts can be used alongside these strategies. It is important that stickers, once given, are not taken away as this devalues their previous efforts. If you decide to offer a reward, it should be special time or a special event, rather than a new toy. This will help your child to develop 'intrinsic' motivation – to learn that making good behaviour choices feels good and is worth doing for its own sake and can make them feel proud of themselves.

For very young children, rewards and sanctions need to be immediate. It is too difficult for them to make the link between their behaviour and the consequences if rewards or sanctions are saved up over a period of time.

Please speak to a member of staff if you would like further information.

Information about the parenting courses offered by Bucks County Council can be found by following the link below:

<https://www.bucksfamilyinfo.org/kb5/buckinghamshire/fsd/advice.page?id=TNNwfojyI4>