
DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE CHILD GUIDANCE: HELPING CHILDREN GAIN SELF-CONTROL

▼ ▼ ▼
by Will Mosier

Dealing with disruptive behavior in the classroom is one of the most difficult issues an early childhood educator faces. In trying to redirect or extinguish disruptive behavior, teachers need to use developmentally appropriate practices as laid out by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

According to these practices, the purpose of child guidance, or discipline, is not to control young children but to help them learn to be cooperative. The most effective techniques help children learn how to accept responsibility for their actions and empower them to exercise self-control.

Discipline should not be punishing. Instead, it should provide children with learning experiences that nurture an understanding of social consciousness. Those learning experiences include participating in generating class rules, receiving positive reinforcement for pro-social behavior, experiencing the natural and logical consequences of their behavior, and observing adults in pro-social, person-to-person interactions. Ultimately, any child guidance technique must nurture each child's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Involve children in creating classroom rules

An important initial step in ensuring a developmentally appropriate pro-social environment is to create a set of classroom rules in cooperation with all the children in your room on the first day of the school year. A cooperative approach is the key.

With 3-year-olds, you may need to propose two or three simple rules, explain the reasons behind them, and invite their cooperation. By the time they turn 4, most children will be able to propose rules and discuss them. Ideally, classroom rules are not teacher-dictated. They must evolve from ideas discussed with and agreed upon by the children.

By encouraging children to participate in setting rules, you are laying the foundation for a community

of learners who follow rules, not because they will be punished by the teacher if they don't, but because they feel a part of that which they help to create. Using a democratic group process helps children to develop moral reasoning.

Creating rules helps clarify behavior expectations. If children are to know what behavior is expected, the guidelines must be stated as positive actions. Help children with wording that says what they are expected to do, not what they can't do.

For example, instead of a rule that says "No running," the rule would read "Running is an outside activity. I walk inside." Other examples:

"I touch people gently."

"I talk in a quiet tone of voice."

"When I finish with an activity, I put it back where I found it."

"I place trash in the wastebasket."

Once the rules have been established, create opportunities to practice them. During the first few weeks of the year, reinforce the class rules through role playing, singing songs, and reading children's books about the rules.



In addition, you must model the rules and socially competent behavior in general. Children best learn rules by seeing them practiced by the adults in their lives. Modeling pro-social behavior demonstrates how human beings should interact with one another. It reinforces behaviors that are respectful of others.

Use positive reinforcement

Make a commitment to verbally reinforcing the socially competent behavior you expect in young children. Use positive feedback to reinforce pro-social, productive behavior, and to minimize disruptive behavior.

To reinforce pro-social behavior, simply look for it. When it happens, use a three-part “I” message, as explained below, to reinforce it. When disruptive behavior occurs, use positive feedback to draw attention to classroom behavior that you would like to see. Avoid focusing on the disruptive behavior.

DISCIPLINE SHOULD NOT BE PUNISHING.

Reinforcing pro-social behavior should not be confused with praise. Praise can damage a child’s self-esteem by making a child feel pressured into attaining arbitrary standards. Praise implies an objective value judgment. For example: “Josh, your painting is beautiful.” If praise does not continue, Josh may perceive that his value, as a person, is diminishing. A young child may start to assume that a person’s value is directly tied to an ability to produce a specific product.

A better alternative is recognition and encouragement. Encouragement is specific and focuses on the process the child used to produce the artwork or how the child is feeling at the moment. For example: “I like the effort you put into your picture” or “I see that you’re happy with the red lines and green circles.” In these examples, neither the child nor the product is labeled good or bad. The focus is on the process or behavior. When stated as positive affirmations, words of encouragement can help nurture self-esteem.

An encouragement system can also use tokens as positive feedback. For example, children could be offered tokens when displaying behavior you want to reinforce. The tokens are not used as rewards,

and they are not redeemed for some tangible prize. Additionally, the tokens would never be taken away once given to a child.

This system encourages a child to repeat desired behavior and will tend to stimulate intrinsic motivation. When a child sees or hears a classmate being reinforced for a particular behavior, the attention given to the targeted behavior increases the odds that the disruptive child will be motivated to try the same behavior.

Examples of developmentally appropriate tokens are construction paper leaves that can be placed on a personalized paper tree, and paper ice cream scoops that can be stacked on a paper ice cream cone. Every child would have a tree trunk or ice cream cone on a designated bulletin board. Early in the year the children would cut out leaves or ice cream scoops and place them in a large container near the board. When a teacher observes a desired behavior, she states the behavior, how she feels about it, and invites the child to get a token. “Tyron, when I see you picking up those blocks, I feel so excited, I invite you to put a leaf on your tree!” Phrasing a message in this manner tends to encourage intrinsic motivation.

Use natural and logical consequences, not punishment

Natural and logical consequences can effectively motivate self-control without inflicting the cognitive, social, and emotional damage caused by punishment. When appropriate, allow natural and logical consequences to redirect inappropriate or disruptive behavior. This will encourage self-direction and intrinsic motivation.

Assume, for example, that Melissa leaves her painting on the floor instead of putting it on the drying rack, and a minute later another child accidentally steps on the artwork and ruins it. Melissa ends up with a torn painting as a natural consequence.

Use logical consequences when natural consequences are not practical. If a child is throwing blocks, for example, a logical consequence would be to lose the privilege of playing in the block area for a set time. Children need the opportunity to connect their behavior and its consequences. Using logical consequences allows children to learn from their experience.

By contrast, punishment relies on arbitrary consequences. It imposes a penalty for wrongdoing. For

example, “Steven, because you hit Johnny, you don’t get to sit in my lap for story time.” Loss of lap time here is an arbitrary consequence, unrelated to the hitting behavior.

Being punished for unacceptable behavior conditions young children to limit behavior out of fear and leads to lowered self-esteem. Experiencing logical consequences, on the other hand, allows children to see how to achieve desired goals and avoid undesired consequences.

Inappropriate, disruptive behavior is typically motivated by the need to gain attention. Wanting attention is not a bad thing. The issue is how to gain it. Children need to learn that they can choose to satisfy needs in socially acceptable ways. Logical consequences help young children become self-correcting and self-directed.

Model clear, supportive communication

Supporting a child’s cognitive, emotional, and social development requires well-honed communication skills. When talking to young children about behavior, differentiate between the child and the behavior. It’s the behavior that’s “good” or “bad,” not the child.

“I” messages. Speaking in three-part “I” messages is an effective tool for keeping your focus on the child’s behavior. This is a three-part, non-blaming statement that helps a young child hear which behaviors are not acceptable without damaging the child’s social, emotional, or cognitive development. “I” messages can be used to address inappropriate



or disruptive behavior as well as to reinforce socially competent and positive behavior.

Use this template for constructing “I” messages that encourage pro-social behavior: “When I see you ____ (identify acceptable behavior), it makes me feel ____ (identify your feelings about the behavior) that I want to ____ (identify what you want to do). For example: “Wow, Tara, when I see you turning the pages carefully as you read your book, I feel so happy I want to give you a high five.”

To extinguish disruptive behavior, adapt the template as follows: “Tara, when I see you hit Mary, I get so sad that I am going to keep you with me until I think you understand about touching people gently.”

Empathic understanding. Empathy is the ability to identify with someone else’s feelings. As early childhood educators, we are responsible for nurturing the development of emotional intelligence in young children. We need to reinforce behavior that is sensitive to the emotional needs of others.

An example of when to use this skill is when children are tattling. Children tattle as a passive-aggressive way to solicit adult attention. Assume, for example, that Takesha complains, “Johnny hit me.” A developmentally appropriate response would be “You didn’t like that, did you?”

This type of response does three things: 1) The focus remains on the child’s feelings, rather than on the actions of another child. 2) It models words that help a child express what she is feeling. 3) It encourages the child to talk about how she feels, which helps her develop enhanced awareness of her feelings and pro-social ways to express them.

Attentive listening. Children need to feel they are being listened to. To communicate that you are paying attention to a child, maintain eye contact, smile attentively, and use appropriate, gentle touch to convey that you have unconditional positive regard for the child. Use the same communication skills with children that you want others to use with you.

Common listening errors that adults make when interacting with young children are analyzing the child’s words rather than focusing on the child’s feelings, rushing the child through the expression of feelings, and interrupting the child’s expressing of feelings. A teacher displaying impatience, for example, can stifle language development and discourage a child from sharing feelings. But a teacher who listens attentively helps children develop emotional intelligence.

Be consistent

A critical factor for successfully implementing developmentally appropriate child guidance is consistency. You need to enforce rules consistently, even when it may be easier to look the other way.

Children need to know what is expected of them. They have difficulty adjusting to unexpected change. When they display disruptive behavior, keep in mind that it may have been conditioned into them since toddlerhood. It's unrealistic to assume that it will be extinguished in just one day. Behavior reinforced prior to the child's being exposed to your classroom will take time to reshape. Don't expect an overnight change.

WANTING ATTENTION IS NOT A BAD THING.

You can change disruptive behavior by using a consistent, systematic process, such as the 12 levels of intervention explained in pages 6-7.

Developing self-control is a process. Throughout the process early childhood educators must demonstrate considerable patience and be consistent in reinforcing productive, socially competent behavior.

References

- Adams, S.K. 2005. *Promoting Positive Behavior: Guidance Strategies for Early Childhood Settings*. Columbus, Ohio: Pearson/Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- American Academy of Pediatrics. 2007. Discipline for Young Children. Retrieved April 23, 2007, from American Academy of Pediatrics Web site, www.aap.org.
- Bredenkamp, S. and C. Copple (Eds.). 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs, 3rd Edition*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
- Cangelosi, J.S. 2000. *Classroom Management Strategies: Gaining and Maintaining Students' Cooperation, 4th Edition*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- DiGiulio, R. 2000. *Positive Classroom Management, 2nd Edition*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Essa, E. 1999. *A Practical Guide to Solving Preschool Behavior Problems, 4th Edition*. New York: Delmar Publishers.
- Feeney, S. and N.K. Freeman. 1999. *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- Ferris-Miller, Darla. 2007. *Positive Child Guidance, 5th Edition*. Clifton Park, N.Y.: Thomson Delmar Learning.
- Gartrell, D. 2004. *The Power of Guidance: Teaching Social-Emotional Skills in Early Childhood Classrooms*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- Menke-Paciorek, K. 2002. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Early Childhood Education*. Guilford, Conn.: McGraw-Hill.
- NAEYC, Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. 1996. *Guidelines for Preparation of Early Childhood Professionals*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- Mosier, W. (Ed.). 2005. *Exploring Emotional Intelligence with Young Children: An Annotated Bibliography of Books About Feelings*. Dayton, Ohio: Dayton Association for Young Children.
- NAEYC. 1999. *NAEYC Position Statements*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- NAEYC. 1998. *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- NAEYC. 1998. *Early Childhood Teacher Education Guidelines*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- NAEYC. 1999. *The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- Rand, M.K. 2000. *Giving It Some Thought: Cases for Early Childhood Practice*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.

About the author

Will Mosier, Ed.D., is an associate professor in teacher education at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. He is a licensed independent marriage and family therapist in Dayton.