

Coping with Challenging Behaviour

Many factors influence children's behaviour. Some children present behaviour problems at the time of school entry. However, many children do not develop behaviour disorders until after they enter school, and for these children, one must consider the possibility that the school experience is a primary factor in the origin of their difficulty.

For children, success or failure at school equals success or failure as a person. Success at school is of fundamental importance for healthy development and post-school opportunity. Many studies suggest that children with reading and other learning difficulties may be more than usually vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems. Links have been reported with a wide range of difficulties including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, dysfunctional attributions, poor achievement motivation, inattentiveness and over-activity and disruptive behaviour problems, aggression and delinquency.

DO establish reward systems to reinforce and recognise appropriate behaviour. Be willing to recognise and reinforce even the smallest signs of good behaviour.

DO encourage all members of the family to assist in the creation of a support system for the child. Siblings play a particularly important role in such a system. Create a non-competitive home environment where the child learns to celebrate his own small victories. The child must learn to view his progress as compared to his own previous performance, not the performance of others.

DO provide the child with choices whenever possible. (e.g., "I want you to clean your room now. Do you want to pick up your toys or make your bed first?") This approach fosters independence and problem solving skills. It also increases the child's ownership of the task or activity.

DO provide the child with a positive model of appropriate social skills. Be certain that your behaviour mirrors the skills that you are teaching your child. (e.g., temper control, courteous listening).

DON'T place the child in highly-charged competitive situations. These are often a source of great anxiety and failure for pupils with learning problems. Focus on participation, enjoyment, contribution and skill development in competitive activities, not on winning or losing.

DON'T assume that the child understood your oral directions or instructions because he did not ask any questions. Ask him to repeat the instructions in his own words before beginning the activity.

DON'T view praise as the only verbal reinforcer - interest works, too! Expressing a genuine and sincere interest in a child can be as positive and motivating as praise. (e.g. "I watched you playing football, Adam. Do you play at home with your brothers?")

DON'T encourage the frustrated child to relieve his stress via pointless physical activity (e.g.

punching a pillow). Rather, teach him to relieve stress through an activity which has definable and observable goals. (e.g. shoot some goals, run five laps)

What about punishment?

DON'T expect punishment or negative reinforcement to have a meaningful or lasting impact upon your child behaviour. Punishment may stop specific behaviours in specific settings, but positive reinforcement is the only effective strategy for meaningful and lasting changes in behaviour.

Overuse of punishment usually doesn't work because:

- it does not teach appropriate behaviour- the child merely learns what he should not do;
- the child often becomes passive in the face of punishment and merely avoids situations rather than learning how to behave
- the child may develop a concurrent set of inappropriate behaviours, such as lying, cheating, or blaming others, in order to avoid punishment;
- the child may adapt to punishment, which will require you to intensify the level and severity of the punishments.

DO use punishment only for behaviours that are intolerable, dangerous to the child or others and seemingly unaffected by a well-planned positive discipline approach. Let your child know it is the behaviour you don't approve of, not them. Remember punishment for something that a child cannot do is different from punishment for something a child knows is wrong.

- Punishment should be applied immediately following the offending behaviour and should be consistently applied.
- Fair warning should always be given (e.g., "If you do that again at the table, you will not be allowed to play.")
- Avoid giving a great deal of attention to the child when applying the punishment and tell him briefly why he is being punished.
- Avoid numerous threats.
- Never take away something that you had previously given or promised as a reinforcer for positive behaviour.
- Literacy activities like extra reading or writing are NEVER appropriate punishments.

Source URL: <http://www.sess.ie/node/874>