

COVID-19: BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

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During this stressful time, many of our family routines and sense of "normal" have been thrown off. Sometimes with stress we see an increase in unwanted behaviors from younger children. This change in behavior is normal, but there are some specific strategies that can make handling these behaviors more manageable.

Giving Clear Directions: When stressed, it can be more difficult for children to follow directions.

- **Get your child's attention** - We need to make sure they hear us. Avoid giving a command from across the room or while a child is playing. Say your child's name and ensure they're listening before providing a direction.
- **Make commands DIRECT** - Direct commands tell your child specifically what you want them to do and that you expect him/her to obey (e.g., "Please sit down on the chair" or "Please put your toy cars in the bucket"). Indirect commands are more ambiguous and communicate more of a suggestion (e.g., "Would you like to sit down? Or "Clean up").
- **Make commands single and simple** -It can be difficult or impossible for them to keep several steps in their memory at one time. Break down larger tasks by providing short single step commands that you know your child can complete (e.g., "Please put your blocks in the bucket", rather than "Clean your room").
- **State commands positively** - When stating a command positively, you want to tell your child what you *want* them to do, rather than what you *don't want* them to do. This ensures your child knows what the appropriate behavior is you want (e.g., child climbing on back of couch, "Please get down", rather than "Don't do that!").
- **Use a neutral tone of voice** - When we are frustrated and stressed it can be very difficult to stay calm. Using a neutral tone of voice, rather than yelling or using a stern tone, teaches your child that you expect them to obey even when things have not escalated.
- **Always provide a consequence for disobedience and positive attention for obedience.**

Labeled Praise - Kids need positive attention everyday as part of their regular routine. Even for children who are exhibiting more behavioral concerns due to stress, there are numerous opportunities throughout the day to provide positive praise

- **Label the behavior you want** - Be specific when praising desired behaviors. Saying "Good job!" does not tell you child what they did that you liked so much, whereas, "I love that you're sharing with your sister!" shows that your child will get positive attention for sharing.

- **Praise immediately** – Praise is most effective when stated during or immediately after the behavior. The quicker you give praise, the easier it is for kids to make the connection between your attention and their positive behaviors.
- **Be excited and enthusiastic** – To reinforce the labeled praise, you should show excitement with your tone and body language. A neutral “Good job” is much less rewarding than an excited “Way to go! You listened so fast!” You want praise to sound different than regular language so that children can notice it more easily.
- **Identify the positive opposites of undesired behaviors** – Think about what you *want* your child to do rather than what you *do not want*. For example, if your child is hitting, the positive alternative is playing nicely or keeping his/her hands to him/herself. When you notice your child is playing nicely, make sure to praise it several times throughout the day (e.g., “Thank you so much for playing nicely with your sister” or “Great job keeping your hands to yourself when you got upset! I’m proud of you.”)

Selective Ignoring – All kids love attention and they will often take negative attention over no attention at all. Many behaviors kids show are unwanted, like whining, pouting, crying, and having tantrums. When parents verbally correct, scold, or reason with kids, it often accidentally reinforces these behaviors as the negative action “worked” and it got a reaction/attention from others. Below are some tips for making your attention most effective in getting good behavior from your children.

- **Identify what behaviors to ignore** – Put simply, what behaviors do you want less of? Ignoring is appropriate for any non-aggressive annoying behaviors (e.g., whining, crying, tantrums). It is not recommended parents use this strategy for aggressive behaviors.
- **Ignore these behaviors** – Ignoring involves:
 - No verbal or non-verbal communication.
 - Not arguing with or correcting your child when the undesired behavior occurs.
 - Turn your body slightly or completely away from your child while they are engaged in this behavior. You may have to leave the room if you’re having a difficult time ignoring the behavior.
 - Being okay with your child yelling, screaming, or having a tantrum at home or in public. While this is very distressing, once your child learns he/she will not get attention for this behavior, the behavior should decrease.
 - Being consistent. Once you decide to ignore a behavior it is very important you continue ignoring said behavior until it has stopped. Giving in and correcting or reasoning with a child once you have started ignoring will only make these behaviors worse and more difficult to change over time.
- **Special attention** - Once you have decided to ignore an undesired behavior it is important to communicate to your child what the desired behavior actually is. To do this, notice when your child stops engaging in the unwanted behavior and *immediately* praise your child for the desired alternative. For example, if your child is whining, ignoring the behavior until they stop whining, then state “Thank you so much for calming down! Now I can talk to you.”