

Positive Discipline

Behavioral Management Skills for Parents and Teachers

Part 2: General Approaches to Managing Behavior¹

Victor Harris, Whitney Fung, Sarah Ellis, and Alison Schmeer²

Other Articles in This Series

Part 1: Types of Misbehaviors and Keys to Success (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1458>)

Part 3: Fostering the Parent–Child and Teacher–Student Relationship to Build Responsibility (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1460>)



Figure 1. Children generally respond well to positive behavioral management practices

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General Approaches to Managing Behavior

When a child is locked in the bathroom
With water running
And he says he is doing nothing
But the dog is barking,
Call 911.
—Erma Bombeck

Research indicates that there must be at least an 8-to-1 positive-to-negative interaction ratio for parents and teachers to have a positive relationship with their children and students (Latham, 1994; 2002). Put simply, both verbal and non-verbal communication needs to be generally positive. Learning how to steer a child or a student toward managing his or her own behavior in healthy ways requires both knowledge and skills that facilitate positive interactions and behavior change (Harris, Johnson, & Olsen, 2013). *Part 2: General Approaches to Managing Behavior* will help you identify specific approaches to successfully managing appropriate and inappropriate behavior at home and in the classroom.

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2. Victor Harris, assistant professor and UF/IFAS Extension specialist, Family, Youth, and Community Sciences; Whitney Fung, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agent, UF/IFAS Extension Polk County; Sarah Ellis, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agent, UF/IFAS Extension Citrus County; and Alison Schmeer, MS; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Positive Behavioral Management

Children and students generally respond much better to positive rather than negative behavioral management practices. When we use the three keys to healthy parenting/teaching to be warm, connected, and monitor children's behaviors, children will be more likely to learn from their experiences and demonstrate appropriate behaviors (Rogge-man, Boyce, & Innocenti, 2008). When they misbehave or make mistakes, we want them to do so under our sphere of influence so they can use them as significant learning opportunities (SLOs) and so we can mentor them toward healthier choices and behaviors (Cline & Fay, 2006). Dr. Glen Latham (1994; 1999; 2002) introduced four behavioral management principles and several strategies parents and teachers can use when children behave well or misbehave. These principles and strategies are discussed below.

Four Behavioral Management Principles

(ADAPTED FROM LATHAM, 1994; 1999; 2002)

Principle 1: Behavior Is Largely a Product of Its Immediate Environment

If a young child or student is misbehaving in one type of situation or environment, skilled parents and teachers often either remove the child from the environment or change the environment through practicing some of the behavioral management strategies mentioned below. When children are young, it is easier to monitor their immediate environment. For teenagers, wise parents and teachers create an atmosphere that promotes their children's friends wanting to hang out at their house or in their classroom.

KEY: *Healthy parents/teachers provide and foster a fun and safe environment so they can monitor their children and students.*

Principle 2: Behavior Is Shaped by Consequences

Effective parents and teachers bring about natural and logical consequences to shape children's behavior and, as a result, teach them accountability and responsibility. Natural consequences occur normally as a result of children's behavior (e.g., a child refuses to wear a coat to school and gets cold) while logical consequences are interventions that parents and teachers use to facilitate SLOs and change. The key is to make sure that a logical consequence is correctly paired with a misbehavior. Telling a child, for example, that she will miss dinner because she did not complete her

homework is generally not a good pairing of a consequence with a misbehavior, because there is not a logical connection between the two behaviors (and the child needs to eat!). However, saying something like, "You're welcome to play with your friends as soon as your homework is done," is a much better way to pair the responsibility of completing her homework with the logical consequence of being able to enjoy free time with her friends.

KEY: *Use natural and logical consequences wisely to shape healthy behaviors.*

Principle 3: Behavior Is Ultimately Shaped Better by Positive Rather Than by Negative Consequences

Rewards tend to motivate children and students to behave well, much more than punishments do. The key for effective parents and teachers is to discover the rewards that most motivate each child. For some, the most motivating reward may be a sticker or a specific type of toy. For another, it may be the privilege of playing with friends for an extra hour, receiving an allowance, or being granted extra reading or recess time. For many children, receiving approval and encouragement from parents and teachers is the most powerful and potent reward. Parents and teachers do not always have to have all the answers when a child behaves well or misbehaves, nor do they always know the appropriate logical rewards and consequences to deliver at the exact moment in time when behavior occurs. As a result, it is okay to tell children that you are not sure how to handle the situation at the present time but that you will think about it and get back to them.

KEY: *Use positive reinforcement most often to guide child and student behavior.*

Principle 4: Past Behavior Is the Best Predictor of Future Behavior

If a behavior occurs previously and is repeated, skilled parents and teachers understand that the behavior is likely to occur again. Thus, taking advantage of SLOs is important so children can learn that certain behaviors come with both desired and undesired consequences. As a result, children will learn which behaviors are appropriate and which are inappropriate.

KEY: *Carefully monitor past and present behaviors and facilitate appropriate consequences to shape appropriate future behaviors.*

The next section includes some strategies designed to help encourage positive and appropriate behaviors and to manage or extinguish misbehaviors. As you read through each strategy, go ahead and evaluate which strategies you are doing well and which ones you might want to work on a little more.

Strategies for When Children Behave Well

(ADAPTED FROM LATHAM, 1994; 1999; 2002)

Strategy 1: Verbally Acknowledge Appropriate Behavior in a Positive Way

a. **Good behavior generalizes.** Parents and teachers will want to acknowledge specific, appropriate behaviors that can be generalized to other positive and appropriate behaviors. Good behavior, if rewarded through encouragement or praise, tends to extend (i.e., generalize) to other positive and appropriate behaviors because children like to please others and as a natural consequence, to feel good about themselves.



Figure 2. Good behavior, when rewarded through praise or encouragement, tends to extend to other positive behaviors
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b. **Assess the quality of your parent–child and teacher–child interactions.** Assessing relationship quality does not mean avoiding issues or ignoring misbehaviors, but it does mean addressing behaviors appropriately and handling them in positive ways. Ask yourself the following questions: Are our interactions with children more positive than negative? Do we often acknowledge appropriate behaviors in a positive way or do we focus more on the negative? Are we generally pointing out deficits or issues or are we being encouraging and positive?

c. **Remember: At least 8-to-1 positive to negative interactions.** Being much more positive than negative helps build the parent–child and teacher–student relationship and further promotes effective behavior management, because children respond best to those who they know care about them.

Strategy 2: Acknowledge Appropriate Behavior Intermittently (Meaning Randomly or Every Once in a While)

One proven way to promote a specific positive behavior is to initially acknowledge it almost every time it occurs. Once the behavior begins to become established, a proven strategy is to acknowledge it every other time, then every third time, and so on, until the behavior becomes permanent (Skinner, 1938). After the behavior is firmly established, rewarding the behavior occasionally is normally enough to keep it established.

Strategy 3: Acknowledge Appropriate Behavior Casually and Briefly

Acknowledging appropriate behavior briefly and casually lets children and students know that we noticed their positive behavior and that it is the expected norm. If we fawn over our children and exaggerate “how great” their positive behaviors are, they may come to depend on us too much for positive affirmations or somehow rationalize that they deserve continued and increased praise for simply doing what is expected as normal behavior. The key is to help children begin to internalize that how they are behaving is something that comes from an internal motivation to do the right thing for the right reason, not from something outside of them that consistently requires an external judgment or affirmation from others. In sum, showing encouragement and praise is a balancing act that requires making sure it is used appropriately but not so much that children become dependent on it all the time.

Three examples of good, better, and best ways to facilitate the internalization of appropriate behaviors are offered below. Notice in the statements and questions how the focus moves from outside the child to within as the child has the opportunity to explain what has occurred.

- **Good:** “Good job.”

This is okay but we want to avoid saying “good job” as often as possible because it represents a general external affirmation and we want the reinforcement of appropriate behaviors to be internalized by the child so that the child affirms his/her own appropriate behavior.

- **Better:** “I noticed you put your blocks away in the drawer where they go.”

This type of reinforcement is still external but it provides a more specific affirmation so the child can identify the exact behaviors that are appropriate.

- **Best:** “Can you tell me about what you did with the blocks?”

Asking this type of question allows children to think and talk about their behavior. Again, when they are able to process their own behaviors, they are much more likely to internalize them by providing their own positive affirmations instead of consistently expecting affirmations from others.

Providing children and students with opportunities to describe how they have behaved in appropriate ways allows them to build an internal structure to regulate their behaviors and to develop their own reward system for performing positive behaviors. In sum, according to Cline and Fay (2006, p. 70), “Children learn better from what they tell themselves.”

Strategy 4: Give Variety to Verbal Praise

Giving variety to verbal praise helps a child to distinguish between the types of behaviors that are being noticed and it also helps parents and teachers to avoid redundancy. Below are some examples of at least four types of variety that can be used when providing verbal praise.

- **Descriptive praise:** “You stacked the blocks so carefully one on top of the other. What are you making?”
- **Deserved praise:** “I appreciate your being so nice to your brother.”
- **Sincere praise:** “I can tell your sister likes it when you let her play ‘dress up’ with you.”
- **Values-rich praise:** “I am proud of you for telling the truth.”

Strategy 5: Communicate to Children and Students That They Are Lovable and Capable

Parents and teachers need to focus on sending children two primary messages: (1) they are lovable and (2) they are capable (Coplen & MacArthur, 1982). Parents and teachers can show children they are lovable by providing real-love supplies through an 8-to-1 ratio of positive-to-negative interactions, by being warm and connected, and monitoring children’s behaviors so they know they are

cared for. They can help children feel capable by providing competency experiences for growth and development (such as doing chores) and by providing multiple opportunities for children to engage in all types of learning. Conversely, parents and teachers can also communicate to children that they are not lovable by humiliating and neglecting them at home or in the classroom. Attempting to dominate children by exerting power and control over them or through trying to overprotect them by not allowing them to learn from their mistakes also strikes out against their feelings of capability. When children are made to feel lovable and capable, they generally feel good about themselves.

Strategies for When Children Misbehave

(ADAPTED FROM LATHAM, 1994; 1999; 2002)

Strategy 1: Ignore Inconsequential Behavior

Consequential behavior includes any behavior that can potentially threaten health, life, or injury to the child, student, or to others. If a behavior is deemed consequential, the parent or teacher will need to intervene. Latham (1999) has suggested asking three questions in order to determine if a specific child or student behavior is consequential or not:

1. Is the behavior harmful or damaging?
2. Will the behavior persist beyond simple annoyance?
3. Will the behavior, though inconsequential now, develop into consequential behavior?



Figure 3. If a behavior is consequential, the parent or teacher will need to intervene

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If the behavior is not harmful or damaging and is simply annoying, it can usually be ignored so the behavior is not reinforced (e.g., making unwanted sounds in the back seat of the car). In a case where two children are pushing each other, the behavior may at first be inconsequential but can become consequential, and so a parent or teacher may want to intervene early. Attempting to run across a busy street or hitting someone with a toy is always consequential.

Strategy 2: Selectively Reinforce Other Appropriate Behavior

When a child is misbehaving, effective parents and teachers choose to reinforce other appropriate behaviors when they are manifest because, as mentioned above, good behaviors tend to generalize to other positive and appropriate behaviors. The key is for parents and teachers to selectively reward siblings or classmates who are exhibiting appropriate behaviors in order to communicate to the offending child which behaviors will be rewarded. Take a look at the two scenarios below to determine the possible misbehaviors that may have occurred previously and how the parent or teacher chose to selectively reinforce other appropriate behavior.

- “Let’s see if you two can roll the ball back and forth to each other.”
- “Can you help me turn the pages? You’ll have to be really quiet so you know when to help me turn the page.”

Strategy 3: Stop, Redirect, then Reinforce Appropriate Behavior

If a child is misbehaving, effective parents and teachers initiate an intervention to stop the behavior, redirect it to something appropriate, and then reinforce the new positive behavior by rewarding it. Below are some examples of how parents and teachers can stop, redirect, and then reinforce appropriate behaviors.

- “Let’s not throw toys, because that can hurt someone. Can you help me build a school and a playground with the Legos?”
- “We’re not going to buy candy today. We have some healthy treats right here. Can you help me take them out of the shopping cart and put them on the counter so we can pay for them?”

Strategy 4: Avoid Parent/Teacher Traps

Parent and teacher traps are snares that they allow themselves to get hooked into by their children or students. They often result in power and control struggles. Wise parents

and teachers try to avoid getting into these situations at all costs. Some of these traps, according to Latham (1994; 1999; 2002), include the following:

- **Criticism**—Includes verbal and non-verbal attacking of a child’s core personality (Gottman, 1994; Harris, Johnson, & Olsen, 2013) through statements that make them feel unlovable or incapable (Coplen & MacArthur, 1982).

Example: “Why don’t you think of anyone but yourself? You are so selfish!”

- **Sarcasm**—Reduces trust and breeds perceptions of feeling unloved or incapable.

Example: “You are not the brightest bulb in the box, are you?”



Figure 4. Wise parents and teachers avoid traps such as verbal attacking of a child’s core personality
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- **Threats**—Escalates negativity and power and control issues.

Example: “Get your rooms cleaned now or you are grounded for the next year!”

- **Logic**—Most often elicits a response of “I don’t know” after demanding that a child or student logically explain why he or she has misbehaved. (For alternatives, see the section “5 Steps to Conflict Resolution” from Part 3 of this series [<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1460>].)

Example: “Sit right there and tell me the reason you chose to hit your sister!”

- **Arguing**—Allows the child or student to engage you in conflict so he or she can exert power and control over you or “play the victim” if you lose your temper.

Example: “I am fed up with your talking back to me! You will do it my way or else!”

- **Questioning**—Demands a child or student answer all of the questions you are asking them (similar to *logic*).

Example: “Why did you choose to be late? Is it ever acceptable to be late? Why didn’t you call? Is there something wrong with your brain that you thought you could get away with not calling?”

- **Force: Verbal or Physical**—Constitutes abuse and maltreatment (Bigner, 2010).

Example: “That has got to be the dumbest thing I have ever seen you do! How can one person be so stupid?”

- **Despair, Pleading, Helplessness**—Indicates a clear sign that the parent or teacher is not in charge and that they are being controlled or manipulated by a child or a student.

Example: “If you will just get your chores finished, then we can all go to the movie. We are all waiting on you.”
“Listen, you can have another ten minutes to get your assignment done, but that’s all I can give you. We’re all waiting on you before we can continue.”

Practice Activity

Take a minute and decide how you will handle the scenario(s) below. Make sure to indicate how you will use the *four principles* and the *strategies* discussed above for when children/students behave well and misbehave in order to deal with the situation effectively.

Scenario 1

Your child throws a block and hits another child.

- Which of the four principle(s) will you use to deal with the situation effectively, and why?
- What strategies will you use for dealing with the misbehavior and for promoting behaving well, and why?

Scenario 2

A teenage student makes a sexist remark in class.

- Which of the four principle(s) will you use to deal with the situation effectively, and why?
- What strategies will you use for dealing with the misbehavior and for promoting behaving well, and why?

As you continue to practice these general principles and strategies for managing appropriate or inappropriate child and student behavior, you will better learn to recognize times when it is important to intervene and times when you can simply ignore misbehavior. Part 3 of this series will

introduce you to some additional skills you can learn and use to successfully manage child and student behaviors at home and in the classroom.

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