

BEST PRACTICES TIPS: GUIDING BEHAVIOR OF TODDLERS

Or, “If not time out, then what??”

Time-outs are not recommended with children younger than age 3, and are prohibited under Wisconsin group licensing rules. Most children this young cannot truly make the connections among the behavior that was unacceptable, why it was wrong, and the time spent sitting in a chair or corner. Here are some alternatives for you to try.

WATCH CHILDREN CAREFULLY AND INTERVENE BEFORE A PROBLEM OCCURS

- Distract a child who is in pursuit of another’s toy by scooping her up, hugging, and bringing her to another area with other toys she likes.
- Redirect a child who is hitting to a pounding bench or cushion, saying “It is not okay to hit people. You may hit this instead.”
- Remove a toy which continues to cause fights, and substitute others the children like.
- If it is time for another child to have a turn, lure the child to a different interesting activity by using words to describe the other activity he enjoys.
- Shadow a child who is biting. Praise or hug the child for positive actions every several minutes. Intervene when you see she is about to bite; offer something else (bagel or teething toy) and say “You may not bite people. Bite this instead.” If another child is bitten, have the biter assist you in aiding the victim by holding a cold cloth on the injury and talk about how sad the bitten child feels, but do not give the biter excessive attention.
- Offer snack or lunch a bit earlier if children seem to be growing irritable.

CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT TO LESSEN CHANCES OF CONFLICT OR FRUSTRATION

- Do not overwhelm children with too many toys. Instead of boxes heaped with things, set out fewer kinds at one time, and plan to rotate some each week or so.
- Have 3 or 4 identical items of popular toys, rather than a variety of similar ones.
- Set out books of vinyl, plastic, cloth, or sturdy cardboard, so toddlers won’t tear them up.

- Arrange 2 or 3 “private spaces” for the child who wants to be left alone, or to watch other children while still feeling protected. Furniture arranged to create a “nook”, or a large sturdy carton with cushions or a soft blanket inside, will do.
- Provide toys which are neither too complex (frustration) nor too simple (uninteresting) for the developmental stages of the group. Change these toys as the children grow older or as new, younger children join the group.
- Where there’s a mixed-age group, as in family child care, try using a gate to separate ages for some parts of the day - separating toddlers from infants or from older children during times when conflicts are likeliest to happen.

KEEP ROUTINES AND EXPECTATIONS PREDICTABLE

- State and restate clear simple rules. “Treat people gently. You may hit this pounding bench instead.” “Feet belong on the floor; tables are for toys and food.”
- State rules positively. “Use your *inside* voice.” “We can run fast *outside*.”
- Limit rules to what is absolutely essential.
- Maintain a familiar rhythm to the day’s activities and use consistent transition cues (songs, chants, piano chords) to prepare toddlers for the next event.

SET A GOOD EXAMPLE AND SEARCH FOR THE POSITIVES

- Say “Please” and “Thank-you” and “Would you like some help?” Use simple social phrases the children can copy.
- Avoid power struggles by offering win-win choices. Rather than “You *must* lay on your cot,” ask “Would you like to lay with your head on *this* end or *that* end?”
- Respond promptly but not anxiously to a child’s distress by comforting, assisting with a frustrating task, or rescuing from a harmful situation.
- Reframe what appears to be misbehavior by refocusing the child’s behavior to a similar acceptable activity. For example, if a child is mashing his oatmeal about on the table, you might say, “I see you like squishing this through your fingers. Oatmeal is for *eating*. Let’s clean this up and go over to the table with the play dough; that will feel *really* good to squish, too.”
- Focus the child’s attention before asking that a task be done. For example, “Do you see all the blocks over there near the bookshelf? I’ll bet you could

fit them *all* in this box” is more likely to get cooperation than merely “Put all the blocks in this box.”

- Speak in a low, calm voice. Address children by their names. Often use words like *gentle, soft, nice, and helpful*. Label positive behaviors: “Jose *petted* the hamster *gently*” or “Sara *shared* the blocks with Tony.”
- Teach toddlers words which *name* their emotions: *mad, sad, glad, scared, silly*. Give them simple sentences for communicating their needs to you and their friends; don’t just say “You need to use *words*.” Example: “If you feel angry, tell us. Say, ‘I’m mad!’ so we will know how to help you.”
- Offer a positive incentive to a child. “When you’ve given John the big truck for his turn, you may choose any book you’d like and I will read it to you.”
- Caress, stroke, hug, rub backs, rock, snuggle, hold children in your lap often.
- Make required tasks into *games*. Clearing lunch plates, wiping tables with damp sponges, picking up dollies and dress-up clothes, washing hands can all be fun if accompanied by a song or chant. Such self-help also makes children feel competent, and lessens the likelihood of temper tantrums.
- Praise positive behaviors, but don’t *overpraise*. A smile, thumbs-up, or “yes!” may be all that’s needed for a particular child doing a familiar task. At other times, you will need to praise *specifically*, so the child understands just what it is that has pleased you. “I saw you give Jenna the car when she asked you for it. You were a good friend” will teach more than “You were good to Jenna” or “Good job.”
- Offer a face-saving way out: If you see a child has put another’s coveted toy in her own cubby, you can bring her to the cubby and say, “I see Tina’s doll is in *your* cubby. How did it get there? Do you think you *meant* to put it in *Tina’s* cubby but set it in yours by mistake? Tina will be very sad if she can’t find her doll.” Then you and the child take the doll and put it in Tina’s cubby.

Bibliography:

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