

## TIP SHEET

# Behavior Guidance for Young Children

Many parents struggle with finding the best method to improve a child's behavior. Punishment can have a negative effect on a child's self-esteem. There are better methods to help children develop problem-solving skills, a sense of freedom to choose their own path and the self-esteem necessary to change a pattern of bad behavior. The following tips can help parents and teachers guide children's behavior.

### Use guidance to teach children life skills.

- By guiding children's behavior, rather than dictating it, you will help them problem solve, think for themselves and develop self-esteem. Children who are guided are more open to suggestions and better able to work with others.

### Understand the reasons for a child's behavior.

- Understanding why a child acted a certain way will help you to guide him/her to make better choices next time. Look at the big picture. Is the child reacting to something in the environment? Is the child acting out because of the time of day? Is the child acting out because of another child, because of an adult, or because of an internal problem? Children often act on their desire to gain something, whether it is a toy or an adult's attention. If you understand why a child acted out, you will more directly address (and potentially correct) the bad behavior.

### Build and maintain an encouraging environment (in the classroom, at home, etc.) in which all children feel welcome as fully participating members.

- Punishment enforces a negative self-concept in children; when they misbehave and are reprimanded, they feel inadequate and doomed to failure. If the child feels good about his/her decisions and actions, he/she will contribute more enthusiastically and positively to the group. When guiding behavior, give undivided attention to the child's learning needs, express feelings appropriately and without negativity, and explain the consequences of the behavior. Be sure to provide unconditional caring and attention, have a positive attitude, show the child you believe that problems can be resolved, and protect the child's dignity.

### Use positive, direct language when talking with children.

- Be aware of the language you use when speaking with a child. Be precise and clear. Allow time to listen and understand. Be constructive and encouraging. Point out the positive aspects of a child's behavior instead of criticizing the bad. Give the child a choice when applicable: "Can you ... ?," "Do you want to ...?" Tell the child what he/she should do, not what he/she shouldn't do: "Use your fork," instead of "Don't eat with your hands."

### Encourage positive behaviors instead of punishing negative ones.

- Reinforcing positive behaviors and ignoring negative ones indicates to the child which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Eventually, he/she will phase out the negative behavior and use the acceptable behaviors everyday, because those behaviors will earn him/her attention and praise. If you establish ground rules, set clear expectations, and be consistent and follow through with your plan, the child will have a greater chance for success.

*These tips were compiled from a variety of sources, including [www.mnaeyc.org](http://www.mnaeyc.org).*

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