

FOCUS

On Early Childhood



Pennsylvania Key
Early Childhood Mental
Health Consultation
Project
717-213-2063
micwal@berksiu.org

Positive Reinforcement

The great American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, once said, "A torn jacket is soon mended; but hard words bruise the heart of a child." Praising a child is more effective in the long run than punishment and criticism. While there are many reasons for bad behavior, a common one is that it gets the attention of adults, and we know that children crave attention. So, if we pay attention to children by praising them when they do good things, it's easy to see how bad behavior can be significantly decreased. Children love praise and need the "warm fuzzies" of praise and positive reinforcement for their healthy social and emotional development. Positive reinforcement also inspires confidence and teaches children how to communicate with others.

Tips for positive reinforcement:

- Praise specifically. Instead of saying, "You're such a good girl," say, "That was really kind of you to share your toy with your sister."
- Label the behavior and not the child. Don't say, "David, you are a bad boy." Say, "David, it is not kind to hit Janet" and offer an alternative for resolving the problem causing the bad behavior.
- Stop and think before you respond immediately to a behavior you don't like, because this could reinforce the behavior by paying attention to it. Perhaps by waiting and watching for the child to do something right, you can focus the attention on the positive behavior rather than the negative.
- When a child is doing some things right and some things wrong, highlight what he did right.
- Compare the child's behavior to past behavior to show that she is growing. For example, you could say, "Keisha, it makes me happy when you pick up your toys right away when I ask you. I used to have to ask you lots of times. You're really growing up."
- Help your child set goals for improving his behavior. You might say, "Maybe someday you'll pick up your toys without my asking you. That would be a really nice surprise for me!"
- When you do need to correct a behavior, start by emphasizing something positive about the child, and then tell her specifically how she can improve.
- Don't worry that positive reinforcement will spoil the child. Praising children will more likely make them want to do more good things to get more praise.

Resources:

- Matt Tim and Sharon Doubet, "Acknowledging Children's Positive Behaviors," What Works Briefs, Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning; www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/briefs/wwb_22.pdf.
- Brenda Gargus, "Using Positive Reinforcement," Family Education: <http://life.familyeducation.com/communication/behavior-modification/29734.html>.
- "Positive Reinforcement and Rewards," Purdue University Department of Child Development and Family Studies; www.ces.purdue.edu/providerparent/pdflinks/positiverewards.pdf.