

Dealing with Children's and Teen's Challenging Behavior During Corona Times

The long days at home are challenging for both adults and children of all ages. You might find yourselves dealing with crying children, nonstop nagging, temper tantrums and confrontational teenagers that are driving you crazy. How can you constructively deal with your child's behavior?



Simple Principles for Managing Children's Behavior

Children can react to the intense atmosphere, the stress and the change in their routine with a variety of challenging behaviors, from constant crying to terrible temper tantrums. Some of these behaviors are typical of specific developmental stages, and some can be a reaction to the difficult reality of dealing with the coronavirus crisis. The best way to manage challenging behavior is to prevent it ahead of time. A constructive reaction can help lessen the frequency of challenging behavior, and prevent situations in which you accidentally reward them.

There are a number of tools that can help you react in a consistent and healthy manner when your child behaves in a challenging way. The main principle behind most of these tools is **positive discipline**: Paying more attention to behaviors that we'd like to encourage, and paying less attention to negative behaviors. Using the positive discipline method consistently helps decrease and avoid challenging behavior in the long run. Here are some helpful tips for doing this:

Create a set routine

A routine helps family members manage more smoothly, since each person knows what, when and how they and the other family members are doing. Kids especially need a routine that guides their behavior and provides them with a sense of security. Set times for meals, play time, showers and sleep. Set times for studying, talking to friends and resting for the older kids. Talk to the kids about the routine you set, and think about what parts of the family routine your kids can take responsibility for. During this time, which is characterized by lack of stability, a routine is especially important to help your kids manage themselves throughout the day, move easily from activity to activity and avoid crises' that stem from boredom. Establishing a routine can even help you recognize the younger children's needs and avoid hunger and exhaustion, which can be a trigger for many challenging behaviors.

Write family rules

In addition to a set routine, together with the kids you can write family rules that will help everyone in the house get along with each other while respecting everyone and their needs. Using clear and consistent rules helps kids from the age of three through adolescence learn about limits and take responsibility for their behavior. Efficient rules include clear phrasing about the desired behavior, while setting outcomes for not following them. They make clear to the kids what you expect, and help you remember what to expect and what to react to. These rules support a peaceful routine and help avoid outbursts, fights and the kids hurting each other. Use the rules to help the younger kids remember what the expected and acceptable behavior is in your house. Fit the rules to the teenager's changing needs, while listening and discussing them, to help them develop self-discipline and independence.

Use praise and rewards

The importance of praise can't be exaggerated when you want to change challenging behavior. The desired ratio is six praises for every criticism you give your child. It's easy to step into a trap and only react to the behavior that you don't like. Find times when your child behaves the way you like, even if it's a minor success, and try getting his/her attention. Use praise to describe exactly what you liked about your child's behavior. You can also praise efforts and not just achievements, to encourage your child to keep trying hard in the future. Use praise to encourage following the routine or the family rules: Praise the young child for managing to stop playing and get in the shower, and the teenager for keeping the bedtime they set. Even if the teenagers are no longer dependent on you, they still need your approval. Sometimes, after positive behavior, you can even use rewards (a positive result or a small treat you give your child).

Create distractions

A natural and meaningful method for dealing with challenging behavior, especially with younger kids, is using distractions. Diverting children's focus and attention can avoid the development of situations that lead to challenging behavior. When you notice that your child is getting frustrated and losing their patience, get involved before things get worse. Offer your child a game or a new activity, teach them something new about the toy they're holding. You can also try changing their place, taking your child into another room so that they can become interested in other things. With older kids you can change the subject or offer an alternative activity.

Punishments - are they necessary?

A punishment is a negative result of inappropriate behavior or rule breaking, the goal being to make it clear that this is unacceptable behavior. When using punishment, it is important that the connection between the behavior and the **negative outcome** is clear: for example, when a child refuses to take a bath when you asked them to, you can tell them that this way they won't have time to hear a bedtime story before going to sleep. When there's no natural or logical result for the behavior, you can **deny them privileges**, like watching TV or playing on the computer. Another tool that can be used when reacting to unwanted behavior is a **time out**. In this method you distance your child to an area defined ahead of time (choose a safe area with no games), and let them be alone for a few minutes. It's very important to understand that using punishment is only affective when balanced by positive discipline tools, praise and a positive atmosphere that teach your child the desired behavior.

It is important to use any kind of punishment - negative outcome or time out - only when you're calm, and not when you lose control. If you're stressed or angry, try taking a deep breath to calm down before you react. If this doesn't help, leave the room and take a break to regain control. When parents yell and threaten, the challenging behavior tends to repeat itself. Never use physical punishment, like hitting or pinching. A physical punishment can hurt your child and teach them that physical solutions are acceptable.

Challenging Behaviors in Different Developmental Stages

Babies: Ongoing crying

Babies communicate by crying, but it can be difficult to understand why your baby is crying and what can be done to help them calm down. Babies cry when they're hungry or tired, when they're cold or hot, when they're scared, when something is hurting or bothering them, or when they need love and affection. If your baby cries for a prolonged time, you might feel very stressed. You may find that there are hours when your baby tends to cry more, the afternoon, for example. When caring for older kids at home as well, dealing with the baby's crying can be especially challenging.

What can you do?

- First of all, remember that sometimes babies feel our, the parents, distress, and express it by crying.
- Try checking if it's possible that your baby is:
 - Hungry (how much time has passed since their last meal?)
 - Tired (is it getting close to their bed time?)
 - Not at ease (is their diaper full? Is their shirt tight? Or maybe they've been in the same position for a long time?).
- A set routine will help you easily recognize feeding and sleeping times, and help you to better recognize the different types of crying.
- If you can't calm your baby down, try using movement, in a baby carrier (snuggli) or the baby carriage. A baby carrier will allow you to leave your hands available to do other things.
- If you feel like you can't take the crying anymore, ask for help from another adult or put the baby down in a safe place and take a short break. Never shake a crying baby. A little crying won't hurt them, so allow yourselves to breathe and regain control.
- If you are scared the baby isn't feeling well or is in pain, or if in addition to all the crying other symptoms appear, consult a pediatrician.

Toddlers: The peak of temper tantrums

From 18 months through three years, 90% of children might experience temper tantrums and outbursts of rage, sometimes on a daily basis. A temper tantrum can be a reaction to frustration or a situation that your child feels like they cannot deal with. At these ages your child still can't communicate their desires and needs with words, and their ability to cope with bad feelings is not yet developed. Temper tantrums are an outburst of rage that can include crying, screaming, laying down on the floor, arching of the back, kicking, breaking things, and some children may stop their breathing. When children are stressed, tired, hungry or overstimulated, they have a harder time dealing with frustration so temper tantrums may occur more often and be worse. Also, there are children with tempers that tend to have more tantrums than others.

To avoid tantrums or reduce the intensity, try the following:

- Reduce the number of situations in which your child is hungry, tired or over stimulated.
- Notice when the frustration starts to build up and try to intervene: use distractions like offering your child a new toy or a soothing activity, change the atmosphere or the place.
- Recognize triggers for tantrums and plan how to deal with them ahead of time; reduce challenges and frustration, think about what can make things easier for your child.
- Praise and reward your child when they manage to stay calm - react enthusiastically when they successfully deal with frustration.

How should I react when a temper tantrum is taking place?

- Stay calm, act slowly and keep a low and calm tone of voice. Anger can make things worse.
- Ignore your child's behavior, don't look at them or talk to them until the tantrum is over. Referring to the tantrum can send the message that this way they can get your attention.
- Make sure that your child is not getting what they want because of the tantrum: if you decided that this is the time to stop playing a game, gently insist on this, move the game away and put it somewhere they can't reach it.
- React consistently so that the problem doesn't get worse.

Kids: When they don't stop nagging

When your child doesn't accept "no" for an answer and keeps nagging and asking for things that they can't have, it's exhausting. Sometimes the nagging works; the parent has a hard time standing behind his/her decision for a long time, especially when they are scared that their refusal will trigger whining or a temper tantrum, while agreeing will make the child happy. Even if you know that ignoring the nagging will make them stop eventually, you might feel like it's hard to do this. But when your child knows that nagging is an efficient way to get what they want they might nag you more often and for longer. So how can you decrease the frequency of the nagging?

- When you know there's a chance your child will nag, set rules ahead of time. Decide on the number of programs your child will watch, and make it clear what the response will be if they nag you and say they want to watch "just one more episode".
- Praise your child when they follow the rules or stop asking you when you say no. Show them that you've noticed and give them positive feedback, for example: "I'm so proud of you for helping me put away the shopping without asking if you can eat the candy I bought for the holiday now!" Or "you behaved so maturely now when you turned the computer off, we'll have time for a quick card game together!"
- Make it clear that you won't consider the request "yes" or "no" until your child is nagging, whining, threatening, or threatening. Don't answer "yes" or "no" until you're happy with the way they're asking.
- Only say "no" when you mean it - and then stand behind your decision.
- Don't be tempted to give in after a temper tantrum or a crying fit - remember that if you do, you may enforce negative behavior. If it doesn't help, take a deep breath and ignore your child's behavior. If necessary, you can use a time out so that they calm down.

Teenagers: Managing confrontations

More often your children reach adolescence, you're likely to get into confrontations with them when you're. As part of their journey to independence and autonomy, there are more and more disagreements between you. This is a natural and healthy process, and confrontations are an inseparable part of a close relationship. It can even strengthen and deepen your relationship with your child. Still, too many confrontations can increase the family members' stress levels. Confrontation management skills will help you efficiently deal with this and teach your child a few important life skills:

- Choose your battles. Don't confront them with small issues. Give up control sometimes and save your energy for the really important things, like safety and security.
- To better understand your child's point of view and their difficulty seeing the whole picture, try remembering what you were like as a teenager.
- Talk when you're both calm and can have a pleasant discussion, and not while you're mad. Make eye contact, listen and make sure to treat your child seriously and with respect.
- If you lose control for a moment or react severely don't be too hard on yourselves, it's natural and happens to everyone. Just apologize and try starting over.
- Let them talk, wait for them to finish, and be open to be viewed. In order for your child to have an open conversation with you, you'll need to be prepared to deal with your feelings even when you hear things you don't like. You don't have to react immediately; you can come back and continue talking once you've thought about it and formed an opinion.
- Think about what you'd like to say to them ahead of time and explain your opinion shortly and simply.
- Talk about your feelings and honestly tell your child how their behavior affects you. This way your child will be able to understand that you worry about them, now and in the future.
- Be prepared to compromise. Negotiate with your child and teach them that compromise is a good way to solve confrontations.
- When you say "no", do it calmly, while understanding and respecting your child. Say: "I understand that you really want to go to this party, but right now there's no safe way to get there. At the moment the answer is no".
- Allow your child to express their disappointment and let off steam, give them the space they need.
- Check later if they'd like your help calming down, but allow them to deal with it on their own if that's what they'd rather.
- If your child shows intense anger, take a break for a few minutes to calm things down. Listen to them and show them that you care about their feelings. Try to stick to the topic you were discussing and not stray to other issues.
- If a teenager becomes violent, damages property, curses or threatens, draw a line and send the message that this is not acceptable behavior. Tell them that you won't talk to them in this state, but that you'll be happy to solve the problem together when they calm down. Make sure they know that their behavior will have consequences. Make sure to stay calm and to set a personal example for anger management.

Take care of yourselves

Parenting can be very hard work, especially during these times that are exceptionally intense and stressful with children of all ages. Give yourselves time, take care of yourselves and make sure to eat healthy food, get exercise and rest. If you feel like the struggles are too overwhelming, don't hesitate to seek professional help.