

RESPONDING TO CHILD BEHAVIOR

Parents can use three types of responses to improve their child's behavior:

Rewarding, Ignoring, and Punishing

Tips on when and how to use each technique are provided below.

Reward (aka Reinforcement)

- The general rule is that **any behavior that is rewarded will increase**. For example, if you tell your child, "I love how you're sharing with your brother," your child will share more often with his/her brother.
- Rewards are the **most effective** way to change a child's behavior! Use of either of the other two methods (ignoring or punishment) **MUST** also involve rewarding the child or they will not work.
- As a parent, your job is to "Catch your child being good." When your child's negative behavior is taking all of your attention, take time to sit down and come up with the opposite of the negative behavior that you can reward. For example, if your child is always yelling in the house, provide a reward for the opposite - talking in a calm, inside voice.
- A reward can be anything that is positive and desired by your child. Often the best reward is your attention and praise. Rewards can be extra privileges (e.g., staying up late one night), extra time with a parent (e.g., one on one play time with mom), or other fun activities.
- Rewards need to change every few weeks so that children do not lose interest. For example, after getting your favorite dessert every day for a week, it's not quite as desirable anymore!
- Rewards must be dependent on the child showing the target behavior. If a movie is a reward for a week of room cleaning, the child must complete the chore each day to earn the movie night. If the child doesn't complete the chore but still gets to go, room cleaning is not reinforced and the reward loses its value.
- **Praise is often the best reward.** "Labeled praise" is verbally letting the child know exactly what they did that you liked, such as "I am so proud of you for staying in your seat at the dinner table" or "You did a great job staying calm when your sister got to play the video game first."

Ignore (aka Selective Attention)

- Kids do things like rolling eyes, arguing, having temper tantrums, and whining to get their way. These undesirable behaviors will often decrease or go away completely if ignored. By engaging with kids (such as arguing back) when they do these behaviors, you are giving attention (which is what they want) and keeps the behaviors going.
- Ignoring should only be used for behaviors that are not physically harmful to the child, others, or property. If a behavior is harmful, you must immediately address it!
- You must ignore 100% by your actions and words. When ignoring the negative behavior, make no response to the child. No more warnings, comforting, scolding, laughing, reminding, etc. or it's back to square one.
- It can be helpful to direct your attention elsewhere and wait for the child to return to you in an appropriate manner. For example, if you are engaged in a game with your child and he or she begins throwing a temper tantrum, return to playing with the toys and wait for the child to return. When they do, give a lot of praise for their appropriate behaviors (I'm so glad you came back to sit at the table and play with me.)
- When you first ignore a behavior (such as whining), you can expect the child to "up the volume" at first. If you continue ignoring and do not give in to the child's attempts to get your attention, they will stop the behavior...although they may test you a few more times! However, if you do respond to the child at this louder volume, you've just taught them that, if they whine loud enough, you will give in---not what you want them to do!

Punishment

- Punishment is any disliked, unwanted consequence given to a child (e.g., extra housework) or positive privilege taken away (e.g., videogames) in order to decrease the child's negative behavior.
- Punishment is best used for behaviors that cannot be ignored (e.g., harm to others) or the more frequent and severe behavior problems that a child shows. Hitting a sibling, for example, is a harmful behavior that should not be ignored.

- Punishment must ALWAYS be paired with rewards for positive or appropriate behavior. If there is not an equal balance with praise, punishment won't work.
- Avoid banning pro-social activities (e.g., involvement in boy scouts, sports or band). Do remove privileges such as a trip to the movie, videogame time, or internet use.
- Punishment is most effective when it is:
 - ✓ Consistent
 - The same consequence should be given every time the rule is broken. If a child *sometimes* gets away with the behavior, they will learn to try their luck.
 - ✓ Immediate
 - Punishment should be given as soon after the misbehavior as possible.
 - For example, placing a child immediately in time-out after they hit a sibling is more effective than having them wait until another parent comes home for a lecture.
 - ✓ Strongly disliked
 - It must be something that the child really, really wants to avoid. The punishment needs to be something that the child will choose to avoid in the future by following your rules.
 - If a child is grounded from TV, but can still play with friends or play videogames, then he or she may not even notice that they're grounded...and then it isn't going to work as a punishment.
 - ✓ Short-term
 - The child needs to soon have another chance to earn privileges by showing good behavior.
 - Usually several hours to two days is long enough for punishment, and this depends on the child's age and severity of the offense.
 - Avoid punishing a child for long periods because this decreases motivation to do good, and the child may forget what they were even grounded for in the first place!