

Hints to Support Good Behavior in Children with Special Needs

Tips to Support Good Behavior

Relationships are at the heart of learning and good behavior. A good relationship helps a child feel safe, supports regulation, and allows the child to function at her best.

Tune-in to the child's emotions. Read body language. Children communicate through eyes, glances, smiles, as well as words. Find out what is he thinking and feeling? Is he excited, calm, nervous or anxious?

Empathize! Be interested in what the child is thinking and feeling. This is your starting point for a relationship and conversation.

Get Engaged. Stay engaged and then do it some more! Use affect! Woo, warn, entice, encourage, celebrate, and sooth. Have fun yourself, make jokes, listen, and share the kid's excitement, but always be respectful and avoid sarcasm.

Open and close circles of communication through actions, touching hands, high fives, head nods *and* words (signs/pictures). Non-verbal exchanges can be even more important than verbal exchanges, so be aware and respond to subtle cues. Rich back-and-forth communication is possible with children lacking verbal skills. Get connected and stay connected (lots of circles).

Use more comments than questions particularly when trying to get the connection going. Questions can be very challenging for children ("I love swinging!" instead of, "Do you like swinging?") "Yuk!", "Hurray!", "It is sooo windy today!" "The water's too cold!"

Add choices. Once you have tuned in add choices: faster/slower? Stop? Stand up or sit down? Questions can help more advanced kids explore their experience.

Give specific praise, drawing attention to what the child is doing right, "You paddled ten times in a row. Give me a high five."

Support autonomy: Give a child appropriate authority over her body. "Do you want a cushion or do you want to sit on the seat." "Do you need help to get in the car?" "Tell me when to lift you." "What do you want me to do?"

Support transitions: Changes in activity, particularly greetings and partings, are emotionally challenging and require extra support. Be an emotional anchor. Communicate what is expected with care.

Encourage peer interactions (circles). "Talk to each other and decide what we should do." "Find out what D wants to do." "Can you help D get ready?" "I wonder what D is feeling?" "I wonder what is making D upset?" "Is there anything you can do to help D?" "Who is talking the most?" "How can we make this conversation include everyone?" "Look at her face."

Harness contagious group energy. When people are animated and excited they learn more, talk more and work harder. When the child is ***really interested*** then they are capable of more.

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Problem solve, when circles are cooking: “Tell me when to go.” “Uh Ooh, I don’t have a paddle!” “When do we push?”, “What else do we need?” “My boat is not moving, what can we do?”, “How do we get off the sandbank?”, “How do we get back in the boat?”, “What can I do to help?”, “Who should pull?”, “Which direction?”, “What will happen if.....?” “What would have happened if...”

GET REASONABLE COMPLIANCE

Generally, when we understand why the child is having difficulty we can support success rather than generating confrontation. How can we enable the child to listen to us?

Set clear limits. Provide choices within these limits. **Negotiate the details.** “We’ll paddle to the buoy, which way do you want to go?”

Grandmother’s rule: First we do THIS, then we can do THAT!

Provide rhythm and predictability to make it easier for children to cooperate. Rhythmic actions, clapping, counting, chanting or singing will help to calm and organize inattentive children. For example count five strokes when you want the child to clean his teeth, brush five times and then let him swap sides.

Give clear, simple directions Use few words (short, clear sentences) with repetition and include pictures or write things down to help memory. Recognize that many children understand only extracts of what you say (even if they talk a lot). Many children have short-term memory problems and quickly forget what you say.

Break a task down into mini-goals: To prevent a child from becoming overwhelmed, create expectations that are small and achievable. Work patiently without pressure but with the assumption that the child will be successful on each goal separately: “Give me a high five,” “Sit beside me by this tree,” “Look at the windsurfers out there,” “I’m holding your life-jacket, we can put it on,” “Let’s sit on the windsurfer, just sit on the side,” and “Let’s push out a little bit.”

Help the child to see the big picture. A child feels more secure knowing:

1. What you want her to do?
2. How long or how many times she is expected to do it?
3. What will happen next?

Diffuse confrontation. Child invites you to fight, your response communicates: “No thank you, what else do you have to offer?”

ADAPT TO SENSORY DIFFERENCES

Each child is unique and reacts differently to the environment.

Some children are very sensitive. For example a child may have a strong reaction to a touch on the hand, the sound of the wind or the movement of a boat. These children may easily become overwhelmed, anxious or angry. These children may do better if you are gentle and speak quietly with them.

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Some children are very sensitive to feelings inside them. They may feel emotions stress or pain very intensely. Their experience of the world may lead them to have big reactions to small things that happen.

Other children need a lot of touch or stimulus to register what is going on. These children may be under reactive to sensation and may do well with a lot of movement and stimulus. They may respond well if you are very energetic and excited.

Change the activity so the child stays within a productive range of sensations. Seek the “Goldilocks Experience” - not too much sensation, not too little. This varies a lot between children. The same child may need a lot of stimulus at one minute and less at another. Know when to give the child a break or do something else.

Be aware that many children have poor control of their bodies and as a result may feel bad about themselves. Slowly building expertise builds self-esteem.

DISREGULATION: MELTDOWNS or SHUTDOWNS

If a child has severe regulation issues – some disregulation is inevitable. Disregulation occurs when a child melts down, starts screaming, tantrums, becomes angry or aggressive. Less obviously, the child may shut down: become anxious or frightened, lose communication, become disorganized, or lose touch with the world around her. When this happens the child feels: fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, or unhappiness with himself. When disregulated, the child understands less, interacts less and learns less. Onset can be gradual or abrupt, but there are nearly always warning signs. Even if you were completely perfect in your responses there would still be some meltdowns/shutdowns.

1. **Safety First** Don't ignore dangerous behavior! If necessary, use the minimum amount of physical control to keep everyone safe.
2. **Focus on down-regulation.** Stay calm. Keep your voice low and slow. Reduce and simplify language. Avoid questions. Keep your body low to the ground and non-threatening. Reduce your eye contact.
3. **Stay available for interaction.** When possible, woo the child back into a connection with you. Use your connection to co-regulate the child. Re-establish communication (keep the back-and-forth circles going unless it causes escalation.)
4. **Repair the connection.** Return to the activity you were doing before and regain the relationship. Recovery and repair of the connection is an important skill for the child.
5. **Consequences**, which may be appropriate for some children, may be an effective part of the response. Talk about this after the child is regulated.
6. **Talk through** what happened after the child is regulated and thinking clearly. “Current research shows that we need to instead take the child's point of view first – put ourselves in his shoes and let him know that we understand it is hard for him to do whatever it is, then figure out together what we might do to make it possible. If you are sincere and gain his trust, he will be much more able to work with you together to figure out some

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ideas to try to help him do what he needs to do.” E.g., “I can see that this is hard for you. You don’t want to do this. I’m not sure what the hard part is – maybe it’s... (it’s ok to guess and have him correct you). It looks like we do have to.... (Whatever the task is or the problem of the moment). Maybe you have some ideas about how we can do it...”

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