

Parent's Tool Kit For Children 1-12

Jason Sackett, LCSW

USC Center for Work and Family Life

Foreword

Parenting is tough these days. If you are like most parents, your time is tight, your stress is high, you want practical techniques to better deal with your child, and you can't afford to get bogged down in lengthy or vague parenting literature. With this handbook, you are well on your way to positively influencing the behavior of your children and developing a closer, stronger relationship with them. *Parent's Tool Kit* quickly teaches you eight tools to promote positive and socially appropriate behaviors, and effectively manage and decrease problem behaviors. The guide uses numerous examples and takes you step-by-step through each technique, and also highlights common mistakes and improper uses of each technique.

All of the concepts reviewed in this book are based on behavioral theory and learning principles, and have a proven track record of influencing behavior. They are not simply tricks that one parent tried with his child that worked. Since these tools are presented to you in "parent-friendly" language, you don't have to decipher complex psychological wording to understand them.

Your parenting tools will always work more effectively if used consistently by all of the people interacting with your child. For instance, if you and your spouse or partner review the tools together and use them in a similar fashion, your child will learn and improve behavior more quickly. Likewise, it is important to communicate with teachers, grandparents, coaches, etc., so that you all use the tools consistently, as a team.

Because the goal of *Parent's Tool Kit* is to help you facilitate improved behavior in children AND build family relationships, the tools this book promotes are based on the following philosophies:

- ☛ Parenting is a learning experience, so parents will not always be perfect, and must use trial and error to discover which techniques work best with their child, and when
- ☛ Kids are constantly learning, and so they too cannot be expected to be perfect or to immediately act the way parents want
- ☛ Parents have the right to use authority, set rules and limits, and decide what behavior is acceptable or not
- ☛ No parent has the ability to truly control their child, so control is not the goal of these tools; rather, a parent's aim is to **influence** children and **teach them self-control**
- ☛ Kids are people too, and regardless of their age, deserve to be treated with respect

Thank you again for taking the time to read *Parent's Tool Kit*

Before getting started, read this important parenting alert

Many parents have voiced a desire to know what NOT to do with their children before trying new parenting tools. Thus, I will take this opportunity to alert you to what I consider the three most common threats to positive parenting:

- **Extortion**
- **Bribery**
- **Trained non-compliance**

Extortion refers to demanding a reward or privilege, with some form of threat stated or implied if the reward or privilege is not granted. Children often try to exert power or intimidate their parents to get what they want. Extortion may range from throwing a lengthy tantrum until parents give in to the demand, to threatening violence or self-harm to get their way. Some children even threaten non-compliance of necessary responsibilities or tasks, such as homework, until their parents meet their demands. Threats may also be vague, such as, “You better take me to the movies, or you’ll be sorry!”

Extortion is a serious behavior that can jeopardize family relationships, moral development, and a child’s entire future, because the “real world” does not tolerate this conduct. Kids who practice extortion typically start young, using it in less severe forms, and gradually escalate over time. When extortion has persisted a long time, parents may feel that it is too late or too difficult to address. However, failure to address extortion only leads to greater power imbalances, greater suffering, and increased jeopardy for a child’s future. This book empowers parents to confront extortion on all levels and never give in to it. See *Rewarding—Common Mistakes Parents Make* for specific techniques.

Bribery is a strategy that both children and parents use. The child version of bribery is asking for an up-front payment for services. In other words, they say, “Give me this, and I’ll do what you want.” Thus, it is

based on manipulation of parents rather than intimidation or threats. Kids who successfully use bribery lose all motivation to carry out the tasks they have promised, and generally learn to get their needs met through “smooth talking” rather than through hard work and earned privileges. Clearly, this is a dangerous pattern of behavior that can lead to failures in various developmental tasks, as well as low self-esteem and considerable suffering for all involved. Parents need to recognize this behavior at its early stages. Generally, whenever children are trying to dictate the terms of a reward or privilege, it borders on bribery.

Parents use bribery in a different fashion, saying more or less, “We’re going to reward you for something you haven’t done yet so you will appreciate us and work harder.” When other techniques have failed, parents may offer up-front rewards to influence (bribe) their child to do what they want. This act of desperation rarely produces any sustained results, and generally invites more bribery or extortion from the child. Again, this book will provide healthier alternatives to these parenting pitfalls.

Trained non-compliance—the process in which children learn to refuse parental directions—occurs two ways. First, children train their parents to allow them to escape responsibilities, usually through a veiled form of extortion. They make such a fuss when asked to do something that parents are deterred from enforcing follow-through with the task. Or, kids convince parents they are helpless, and that enforcing compliance will damage them. Over time, parents are trained to accept non-compliance or stop demanding any work or responsibility from their child. In this process, the child is also trained, gaining great satisfaction through escape of responsibility and following directions. This book will discuss in detail how to recognize and prevent this destructive training process (see *Freeing*).

Parenting Fundamentals

This chart highlights eight tools you can use with your children to help them develop socially desirable behaviors. Punishment and fining are mentioned here, but this guide recommends against using these techniques. All of these tools may be effective under certain circumstances, but some may also be ineffective under the same circumstances, depending on the child involved. Parents are advised to read these techniques carefully and understand them before putting them into practice. If you have any doubts or questions about a parenting tool, please consult a behavior specialist before using it. To address serious behavioral problems or to implement sophisticated behavior plans, professional consultation is likewise recommended.

Giving Something	Taking Away Something	Changing the Environment	Teaching	Doing Nothing
Rewarding Giving something meaningful to a child following a behavior (by design or by chance), resulting in the promotion of that behavior	Freeing Removing a painful or unwanted circumstance, resulting in the promotion of a behavior	Environment Control Changing a child's environment to influence behavioral changes	Instruction Using explanations, prompts, corrections, and commands to promote a behavior	Ignoring Decreasing attention given to a behavior (or providing a neutral emotional expression) to decrease or eliminate that behavior
Punishing* Giving something painful or unpleasant to discourage a behavior *(not recommended)	Fining* Taking away something meaningful to discourage a behavior	Cool Down Taking a child out of an environment to interrupt a behavior	Modeling "Teaching by example," or demonstrating a behavior, consciously or not, resulting in the promotion of that behavior	Natural Consequences Not interfering with the consequences that normally follow a behavior, or giving "real world" consequences to discourage a behavior

Rewarding

Also known as positive reinforcement, rewarding is a powerful tool that influences behavior. Rewarding means **giving something pleasant or wanted to a child when he or she behaves in a desired way, so that the behavior is repeated and becomes a habit.** A reward, simply defined, is something your child wants. In this model, they are categorized as Basic Rewards and Love Rewards. **Basic Rewards** include tangible items, activities, or privileges that by definition are wanted by the child.

When a parent gives a child a Basic Reward, the implied message is, "You did a good job, and I appreciate it. Keep it up."

Examples of Basic Rewards include toys, new clothes, television time, special snacks, and money (see **Basic Rewards List**, next page for more examples). Every child has his or her own preferences. Recognizing what your child likes is a critical step prior to successful rewarding.

Example: Andrea (10) studies hard for a test and receives an "A". Her parents take her to dinner at her favorite restaurant and let her order anything on the menu. She remains motivated to study. (The reward recognizes individual preferences.)

Example: To reward Josh (9) for completing homework every night for a month, his parents take him to a Dodger game. Josh doesn't really like sports, and had expressed interest in seeing a play. He loses motivation to study. (To Josh, a Dodger game is not a reward, and takes time away from his true interest, drama. Thus, his parents discourage his behavior rather than promote it.)

Example: Monroe (6) makes his bed every day for a month. His parents extend his bed time 1 hour. (The parents reward him for a pattern of successful behavior.)

Example: Parveen (7) loves television. Once she finishes her homework and chores, her parents allow her to watch as long as she wants until bedtime (about 1-2 hours). (Her parents make T.V. a reward for homework/chore completion, not an entitlement for whenever she wants it.)

Love Rewards reinforce behavior through the quality of the parent-child relationship. Examples include verbal praise, affection, attention, laughter, approval, pleasant facial expressions, saying "Thank you," leaving affectionate notes, and offering 1:1 time with a parent (playing games, going for walks, etc.).

Love Rewards are fundamental human needs, can be used often, and strengthen the influence of Basic Rewards. In addition to saying, "You did a good job," they convey the message, "You're a good, loveable kid." For Love Rewards to be effective, the person giving the reward must be significant to the child, or the reward may be rejected.

Keep in mind that children can be sensitive to the manner in which parents give Love Rewards. For example, an 11-year old male may appreciate parental affection, but not publicly, and especially not in front of friends. Furthermore, parents must deliver Love Rewards in an age-appropriate fashion. An older child may feel rewarded hearing "Good job" or "Right on!" However, if a parent says, "GREAT, THAT'S SO WONDERFUL, I'M SO PROUD OF MY BABY!" that child may feel resentful and punished, not rewarded, because the language is not age-appropriate. Parents can observe their child's reactions to language to learn the types of words and expressions that are accepted and interpreted as rewarding, and those that are not.

Does rewarding children actually punish them?
Some professionals believe that if parents praise or reward children for desired behavior, these kids will become dependent on rewards; will not sustain desired behaviors unless the rewards come constantly; and will suffer a loss of self-esteem as a result of this dependency. Some parents also disagree with the idea of rewarding, and believe that kids should carry out responsibilities and behave to a high standard with no expectation of reward or recognition. This author disagrees with these points of view, and suggests that parents reward children many times every day, both deliberately and inadvertently, often in very subtle ways. Thus, the idea is not to avoid rewarding children, but to increase awareness of rewarding practices. Ultimately, parents want to reward their child in a proper and consistent manner that reinforces socially appropriate behaviors instead of undesirable ones, and that avoids the syndromes of extortion, bribery, and trained non-compliance. Parents who deny the need to reward children are fighting against basic human learning—a losing battle. That is, if a child receives no payoff (either Basic or Love Reward) after a behavior, then he or she will ultimately lose motivation to repeat that behavior.

Basic Rewards List

(Examples only—consult your child to complete the list)

Stuff

Toys
Games/ Video games
New clothes or shoes
Posters
Puzzles
Art or drawing supplies
Stereo/ MP3 player
Television
Music C.D.'s or song downloads
Videos/ DVD's
Books/ Comic books
Electronics
Computer
Telephone/ cell phone (10-12)
Skateboard
In-line skates
Skating accessories
Sports equipment
Ski equipment
Astronomy equipment
Pets
Trading cards (baseball, anime)
Hobby supplies (e.g. models)
Tools (age appropriate)
Snacks, candy, ice cream
Money
Credit (toward larger rewards)
Your kid's choice _____
Your kid's choice _____

Activities

Organized sports
Cycling
Skating/ Skateboarding
Bowling
Swimming
Fishing
Skiing
Golf
Parties
Play dates
your kid's choice _____

Outings

Park
Beach
Movies
Restaurant
Concerts
Plays
Miniature golf
Arcade
Zoo
Theme park
Sporting events
Museum
Library
Neighborhood walks
Your kid's choice _____

Classes

Tennis
Dance
Art/Music/Acting
Martial arts
Yoga
Gymnastics
Swimming
Cooking
Woodworking/Building
Computer
Your kid's choice _____

Privileges (most no cost)

Use of computer or internet
Television time
Television in bedroom
Stereo time
Renting a movie
Staying up late
Visiting a friend's house
Having a friend as a guest
Sleepovers (home & away)
Going out to eat
Having a food budget
Having food delivered
Going to the mall (supervised)
Going shopping
Telephone privileges
Having own telephone line
Access to parents' equipment, items, etc.
Setting one's own schedule for chores, homework, etc.
Privacy
Having one's own room
Free time
Dinner requests
Your kid's choice _____
Your kid's choice _____

Rewarding

Four Steps to Success

Step 1: Identify the Basic Rewards

Knowing what your child likes and wants gives you the power to deliver rewards that actually influence behavior. These Basic Rewards are more meaningful when you approach your child and explore her likes and dislikes, rather than waiting for her to ask you. Once kids start approaching parents asking for certain rewards, the parents are already losing influence and are leaving the door open for potential bribery. Furthermore, when parents sit down with kids to develop an expanded list of rewards, it sends them two important messages: 1) Your needs are important to me, and I am paying attention to them; and 2) Your behavior is important to me, and acting the right way will help you get your needs met.

Step 2: Identify Desirable Behaviors

Kids don't automatically know what to do, and therefore constantly test their environment and their parents to learn how to behave. Being an empowered, proactive parent means developing behavior standards for your child. This does not mean attempting to control children or infringe on their rights as individuals. Rather, it involves setting behavioral criteria based on reasonable values and encouraging children to follow them (and ultimately, it is their choice whether or not to follow these standards). It is not the goal of this handbook to direct parents to teach their children to behave a certain way. However, most parents will agree that it is necessary to teach and reinforce the following basic social behaviors to children:

- ✓ Being honest and truthful
- ✓ Being helpful or doing things for others
- ✓ Taking responsibility for one's behavior
- ✓ Attending school, on time
- ✓ Completing studies and homework on time
- ✓ Speaking in a respectful manner to parents, siblings, extended family, teachers, and peers
- ✓ Carrying out chores or responsibilities at home
- ✓ Spending time with family, including required activities (church, dinner, holidays) without protest
- ✓ Communicating clearly with parents about activities, whereabouts, plans, etc.
- ✓ Being accountable for their whereabouts, i.e. being in the appropriate place at the appropriate time
- ✓ Practicing self-care, including diet and exercise

Undoubtedly, parents will want to add to this list. It is essential that they inform their child about the specific behaviors they want to see, and that she understands what is expected. For suggestions on how to teach or explain behaviors to a child, see the ***Instruction*** section.

Step 3: Identify Undesirable Behaviors

Just as most parents expect certain basic behaviors, they also will not tolerate certain behaviors. Throughout the last 15 years, parents in family therapy with this author have universally identified certain behaviors as undesirable:

- School truancy, tardiness, and disruption
- Failure to study/ complete homework on time
- Laziness, poor effort, or having a "helpless" attitude
- Talking back to or nagging parents or teachers
- Defiance of rules, commands, or responsibilities
- Yelling and foul language
- Aggression, threats, intimidation, extortion, bribery
- Lying, manipulation, or stealing from family
- Isolating from family
- Lack of accountability for whereabouts or actions
- Associating with peers known to have problems
 - Any of the above-mentioned behaviors
 - Destroying property, slamming doors, throwing items, graffiti
 - Harassing peers
 - Poor hygiene and personal habits
 - Unsafe or inappropriate behavior

Parents want to avoid rewarding or even tolerating any of these behaviors. However, they can *reward the absence or decline of problem behaviors*.

Example: Jose (8) is sent to the Principal's office 3-4 times a week for various infractions. If he is sent only once a week, his parents add \$2 to his allowance. If he avoids school discipline completely, they add \$5. (This rewards a decline in frequency of problem behavior, with greater rewards for greater progress.)

Example: Every time her sister provokes her, Melissa (4) hits her. One time when provoked, Melissa yells at her instead. Her mother says, "I'm proud of you for not hitting" and sits down to watch a video with her. (This rewards a decline in severity of behavior.)

Example: Timmy (5) gets out of his seat three times per hour. Every 20 minutes he stays seated, the teacher gives him a star. If he earns 10 stars by day's end, he gets to play basketball—his favorite activity. (This rewards a decline in frequency of behavior.)

Rewarding

Four Steps to Success (Continued)

Step 4: Deliver the reward

So, what do you do when your child finally does what you want? You reward her to promote that behavior and improve the chances that she will repeat it. Initially, reward your child every time he or she displays a desired behavior, *as soon as possible* after the behavior is completed. Love Rewards, such as verbal praise and affection, should be used first, and in most cases will be sufficient; if not, you may later add an identified, meaningful, Basic Reward. Timing is critical! The sooner a reward follows a behavior, the greater its influence. A reward received too late may not promote a behavior, but may confuse a child, promote other behaviors, or encourage bribery.

Example: Harvey buys a new video game for his son Raymond (7) to reward him for getting an "A" on a school project the week before. Raymond is grateful, but does not connect the reward with the behavior and gains no more motivation for academic projects. He then begins asking his father to buy him games on a regular basis. (Delivered too late, the reward did not reinforce the behavior and sparked Raymond's bribery.)

In addition to timely delivery of rewards, random or unexpected rewards can have a strong influence on children and their tendency to repeat desirable behaviors. This is often the most effective way to give Basic Rewards. Since the child does not know the reward is coming, he values it more. Or, he continues to produce good behavior, knowing in the back of his mind that a reward could come at any time. Parents who do not allow their children to specifically request or demand rewards are better able to carry out this random rewarding.

Example: Cassandra (8) has been helping her father in the kitchen. After several days, he praises her for her help and surprises her with a dinner outing to an Italian restaurant (her favorite). She continues to assist in the kitchen. (He has randomly reinforced her helpful behavior with praise and a meaningful, basic reward.)

Parents can also get "reward value" from everyday entitlements. For instance, parents planning a family dinner out (because they don't feel like cooking) can connect going out to dinner with desirable behavior, i.e., "You've worked hard today, so we're going out."

Some children like expensive rewards, such as theme park outings, video games, and computers. Although parents cannot provide these rewards regularly, they can set up a credit system in which their child earns points toward such a reward for everyday, desirable behaviors.

Example: Miriam (9) wants a new basketball hoop/backboard worth \$250. Her parents tell her she needs 25 credits to earn it. For every test or project in which she achieves a perfect or near-perfect score, she gets one credit. (With this incentive system, Miriam works toward a goal, earning what she wants in 3-4 months with measurable achievements.)

If your child maintains behaviors with Love Rewards only (e.g. praise), keep using them. Save the Basic Rewards for other behaviors that your child is having more difficulty mastering. If you must use a Basic Reward to promote a behavior, always combine it with a Love Reward (praise, affection, etc.). Eventually, you may decrease and ultimately discontinue the Basic Reward once the behavior has become commonplace. However, it is important to keep acknowledging and giving credit for desired behaviors, or your child may not continue to perform those behaviors consistently.

Successful Rewarding Summarized

Parents identify the behaviors they want to see, and don't want to see, from their kids. They make an effort to find out the items, activities, or privileges their child most likes. When their kid either displays desired behaviors, or decreases/ eliminates undesirable behaviors, the parents praise the child, give her affection, thank her, etc. If appropriate, they also offer a Basic Reward (something she wants) to further reinforce the behavior, or they may offer her credit toward redeeming that reward (for example, if it is very expensive). If Love Rewards are effective in promoting desired behaviors, parents may keep using them by themselves, without Basic Rewards. When Basic Rewards are needed, always combine them with Love Rewards, using them long enough to make the behavior a habit, then decreasing them gradually. Parents may also deliver Basic Rewards randomly or intermittently to increase the strength of their influence.

Rewarding

Common Mistakes Parents Make

Rewarding undesirable behaviors to get a child off your back

Although parental patience may wear thin, it is much easier to endure an undesirable behavior in the short term than to reward it and deal with it indefinitely. This is one way that parents give in to extortion.

Example: Daniel (12) nags his father incessantly to go to a theme park. His father tells him no initially, but eventually loses patience and says yes so Daniel will stop nagging.
(This reinforces nagging and persistence, which will occur with greater strength and frequency.)

Example: Daniel (2) throws a tantrum. His father gives him a cookie. He calms down.
(This reward teaches Daniel how to practice extortion to get what he wants, not how to calm down.)

Laughing at undesirable behaviors

Laughing can be a form of Love Reward and often reinforces behavior. Although you may be tempted to chuckle at inappropriate behaviors, keep in mind that children may repeat these in the wrong contexts.

Example: Carla (4) belches at the dinner table. Her mother cracks up, and Carla laughs with her.
(Laughter increases the chance Carla will repeat this.)

Rewarding a child for a behavior before it occurs (Bribery)

This will not teach a child to sustain a behavior, and leaves parents feeling frustrated, hurt, and disappointed when he fails to perform. To avoid bribery, simply delay the reward until the desired behavior is achieved, regardless of a child's persistence or complaints.

Example: Martha buys expensive shoes for her sons (6 and 9), telling them to be good. They behave well temporarily, but the next day they disrespect her and resume their previous pattern of verbal abuse.
(Buying them shoes does not promote improved behavior, but teaches the boys to demand rewards.)

Example: Herman (11) promises to complete all homework if his parents buy him an X-Box, and they do. Within one week, he breaks the deal. Now he skips classes. He promises his parents he won't ditch if they buy him more games.
(When parents give in to bribery, children do not deliver on promises, and then raise the stakes.)

Rewarding a child when he or she demands a reward (Extortion)

This will not sustain a behavior; teaches a child to be manipulative, demanding, and intimidating; and trains her to act in a desirable way only for Basic Rewards delivered in advance.

Example: Claire (10) says to her father, "I'll break your computer if you don't let me use the internet!"

Parents must hold steady and never give in to threats, no matter how serious, because these will only get worse over time if demands are met. For severe extortion cases, professional intervention (therapy, hospitalization, residential placement, law enforcement) may be warranted. Rather than giving in, parents can delay all rewards and privileges until the extortion stops. Parents can also confront extortion using a strong, authoritative re-direction.

Example: Claire's father responds, "I don't want to EVER hear you talk like that! I'm the parent, you are not my boss, and I am not raising a thug!"

Or, they can ignore extortion, keeping a neutral expression, while continuing to delay rewards.

Example: Claire's father responds, "Yeah, whatever. Do what you have to do. But touch my computer, and you definitely won't have internet access—ever."

Either of these techniques may work, depending on the individuals involved, the family communication style, and the strength of the parents.

Using Basic Rewards without Love Rewards

This keeps children focused only on Basic Rewards, does not help them develop an inner sense of satisfaction for behaving well, and may engender anger and manipulative qualities.

Giving attention reactively, not proactively

Again, attention is a Love Reward that a child seeks throughout development. If a child does not receive sufficient attention to meet his needs, he may seek it through negative ways.

Example: Mario (6) wants to spend more time with his father, who works 60 hours a week, but does not know how to tell him. He repeatedly breaks house rules and gets in trouble at school. Each time, his father gives him a harsh, lengthy lecture.
(Mario learns that acting out gets his father's attention. Although punitive, he prefers this to no attention at all.)

Freeing

Also known as negative reinforcement, freeing refers to **removing a painful circumstance in a way that promotes a behavior**. Like rewarding, this tool must be used carefully, as it can promote both wanted and unwanted behaviors.

Examples that illustrate the power of freeing include:

- **Seat belt warning signals in cars.** You start the engine, and a loud bell rings until you buckle your seat belt. When you buckle it, the bell stops. The removal of the bell rewards your buckling behavior.
- **Time off work.** You work hard. Your boss gives you the day off, reinforcing your hard work.
- **Fast acting pain medication.** You have a migraine and take a pill that quickly relieves pain. Your drug-seeking is reinforced.

In other words, freeing rewards behavior through taking away something unwanted.

Example: George (12) must wash dishes after dinner. Tonight, he helps cook the meal, and does a great job. To promote his cooking behavior, his parents tell him as soon as he finishes cooking that he will be relieved of dishwashing duty that night. (Freeing him from his chore reinforces the more difficult and desired behavior of cooking.)

Example: The Jones' listen to opera every Sunday night and insist that their children listen with them, despite knowing they hate it. The children have been fighting everyday, but are freed from "opera appreciation" for going an entire day without fighting. (Freeing them from the unwanted activity reinforces the decrease of unwanted behavior. Notice that the parents freed the kids after they achieved the desired behavior, not before, which would constitute bribery.)

Parents need to be wary of freeing a child from too many obligations. Kids need to learn to comply with responsibilities on a regular basis, and should be rewarded for complying with them more often than they are freed from them.

Parents will not often use freeing deliberately to promote desired behaviors, but will often inadvertently use it and reinforce unwanted behaviors. Thus, parents must understand the concept of freeing to know what not to do.

The most common misuse of freeing is **trained non-compliance**, in which parents free children from unwanted responsibilities, which only further strengthens their determination to avoid those responsibilities and refuse to comply. Typically, this first occurs when a child complains about an activity and refuses to participate. Parents try to make the child comply, but ultimately allow him to escape the responsibility, thus freeing him and rewarding his non-compliance.

Example: Maria (3) refuses to go to preschool. Her parents struggle with her, but give up, and stop insisting that she go. She continues to stay home. (Maria is freed from the "pain" of preschool, and her non-compliance is rewarded.)

Upon closer examination, it is evident that this process involves a milder form of **extortion**. When the child complains about a responsibility or task, she is really saying, "I'm going to make you miserable if you make me do this, so let me out of it and I'll leave you alone. If you insist, I will only complain and whine louder. My technique is either to annoy you until you give in and free me from this painful task, or to make you think that I am helpless and that you are hurting me if you insist on my compliance."

In either case, *parents must not free a child from a responsibility or task once they have ordered it*, or they are essentially giving in to extortion, reinforcing resistance, and training him to be increasingly defiant. If a child refuses to comply, then parents must delay all rewards or privileges until he ultimately follows directions. If your child employs the second technique—trying to convince you that she is helpless, vulnerable, or impaired to provoke your sympathy and guilt—don't buy it! Kids are far from helpless and can always learn to be responsible, even if they have suffered trauma, are treated for illnesses, or have emotional problems.

If parents feel excessive guilt when they demand something from their child, or do not feel strong enough to withstand a child's protests and enforce compliance, they are encouraged to seek professional counseling. Otherwise, trained non-compliance will likely continue, leading to prolonged suffering for the child, parents, and any other siblings or family members living in the home.

Cool Down

Sometimes referred to as “time-out,” cool down means **temporarily removing a child from his or her environment to interrupt a behavior**. The principle behind cool down is that the child has a chance to calm down and think about his or her behavior, then return to the previous activity and behave more successfully.

Example: Alex (2) aggressively hits her father. He puts her in her crib, soothing her and prompting her to calm down. The moment she starts calming, he praises her. Then, he removes her from the crib to resume her previous activities.

(The temporary change of environment, combined with soothing and prompting, helps Alex calm down more quickly and safely. It also gives her a clear—but humane—message that aggression will not be tolerated.)

Cool down may be used under the following circumstances:

- The child is overly excited or active (to the point of becoming hazardous), angry, or aggressive, and needs to calm down
- It is possible to remove the child from the environment and **keep her removed**
- Other techniques, such as instruction or ignoring, have not been effective to stop the behavior
- The child is capable of using the time to calm down

Example: Brian (8), Sheila (9), and their mother are shopping at Costco. The kids begin running through the aisles, taking toys off the shelves, and playing with them. Mom takes them outside and makes them sit for 5 minutes to calm them down. Once they are calm, she prepares them to enter the store again, stating clear limits and consequences for their behavior.

(The cool down period gives Brian and Sheila a better opportunity to receive feedback about their behavior and make necessary changes.)

Example: Kerry (4) does not want to leave her grandmother’s house, and cries/ kicks violently during the drive home. Her father stops the car, telling her she needs to calm down and that they will not continue driving until she does.

(Although Kerry remains in the same environment, the change from driving to sitting stationery in a car prompts her to calm down.)

More cool down tips

- Use other techniques first, especially **Instruction** and **Environment Control**, before resorting to cool down, and give the child a chance to correct the behavior if not aggressive
- Give one **warning** before using cool down, unless the child is aggressive
- Encourage the child to calm down, letting him know that the sooner he calms, the sooner the cool down period will end
- Offer **choices** or preferred alternatives to the problem behavior

Example: Jerry (5) becomes so frustrated while playing a video game, he starts punching the wall. His mother tells him to calm down, but he continues. She restrains him temporarily, sits him down, and encourages him to talk about what is making him so mad. Before releasing him from cool down, she encourages him to punch a pillow if he becomes enraged again.

(Jerry needs to be physically removed from the stressful situation for his safety. Furthermore, he will not be able to hear his mother’s suggestions until he is sufficiently calm.)

- Praise recovery efforts and release a child from cool down once she has remained calm for 30-60 seconds
- Average times are 1-5 minutes, less for younger children and less severe behaviors
- Once a child has returned from cool down, if the behavior repeats, repeat the cool down process immediately and without a warning, explaining to the child the problem with his behavior

Cool down practices to avoid

Try to avoid using cool down excessively—either too often, or for too long a time period. In addition, it is not advised to threaten a child with cool down, or to use cool down without trying other techniques first. Using the technique in these manners can be punitive, hurt your relationship with the child, keep the child isolated from important social interaction, and make behavior worse.

Environment Control

"I talk to my son all the time. I even try to compliment him when I can, but he is out of control, and there's nothing I can do to control him. I'm at my wit's end!"

When parents feel this way, environment control—**making environmental changes to influence behavioral changes**—gives them options to deal with difficult behavior. A parent cannot control a child's will or actions, but can do much to control his or her physical environment, even away from home.

Environment control may include modification of schedules, structuring activities, introducing people into the child's space, and even altering the parent's own behavior.

Example: Don (12) hangs out with problem peers after school and often gets in trouble. His parents enroll him in a martial arts class, which keeps him busy from school dismissal until dinner. Then, he stays at home. (Due to introducing the new activity, Don no longer has the opportunity to get in trouble.)

Example: Charlene (8) comes home tired and irritable after gymnastics classes, and gets into conflicts with her father. On the days she has class, her father invites her aunt, a very calming person, to join them for dinner. Charlene socializes with her aunt and interacts appropriately with her father. (The introduction of a new person creates extra attention and socializing opportunities, and changes the home atmosphere, which disrupts the previous pattern of conflicted parent-child interactions.)

Example: James (18 months) won't stop crying. Both Mom and Dad try to console him, without success. Dad picks up a toy and starts playing with it, while Mom begins to sing. He stops crying. (The parents' unpredictable behavior disrupts James' emotional outpouring and engages his interest.)

Example: Elisa (8) whines whenever she is told to do something. Her mother typically raises her voice in response. However, one time her mother decides to whine back, in very dramatic fashion, saying "No, I don't want to do it, you're killing me, nooooo!" Elisa reacts with irritability, but no longer whines. (Mom's new response captures Elisa's attention, reflects how Elisa comes across, and prompts insight into her behavior, ultimately helping her to change it.)

Example: Fabiola (6) is angry and irritable because she rarely sees her mother, due to a late work schedule. Her mother notices the problem and changes her schedule. Fabiola's mood and behavior improves. (Changing the parent's schedule alters the behavior.)

Environment control may also involve adding, taking away, changing locations of, or blocking access to certain items.

Example: Rudy (11) fails to turn off the computer by 8 P.M., his deadline. At 8:01, his mother removes the power cord. He learns to shut down by the deadline. (Removing the "corrupting item" teaches Rudy to become more responsible, since he dislikes ending computer time in this manner.)

Example: Albert (12) plays basketball with friends at their house, but his parents don't trust the friends and worry about their influence on him. They buy a mobile basket so the boys play in front of their house. (Adding the basket improves their supervision.)

Furthermore, environment control offers options such as changing seating or sleeping arrangements, changing times of certain activities, or changing the structure of a room or living area to increase visibility and supervision.

Example: Kyra (5) persistently climbs on the couch and plays with the lamp next to it. Her father instructs her to stop, but she continues. He then sits on the couch next to the lamp. (Limiting access influences Kyra to play elsewhere.)

Example: Sarah (6) and Virginia (8) argue severely in the car on the way two and from soccer practice. Since their mother does not yet feel assertive enough to intervene, she trades duties with their father, with whom the girls behave more appropriately. (Changing the family makeup during the commute disrupts the negative behavior pattern.)

Example: Audry (10) practices the violin all afternoon, then tries to do homework at night, but often falls asleep. Her mother sets a rule of no violin until homework is done. (The change in timing improves her motivation to complete homework, as well as her concentration.)

When all techniques fail, including professional help, environment control offers parents a last resort: changing one's living location.

Example: Diane has tried everything to keep Jared (12) away from a group of peers that have a damaging influence on him, without success. She moves the family to Seattle, where they all attend family therapy. (Moving gives her son an opportunity to work on his issues away from the negative peer influences. Note: Moving, without additional support or intervention, is not an effective solution for children with serious emotional or behavioral problems.)

Modeling

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”—Swedish proverb

Modeling, or **teaching by example**, is the most powerful parenting process. Children constantly look for behavioral models, although they may not admit or realize it, and often mimic adult behaviors. Through their daily behavior, attitudes, and expressions, parents are teaching their children by example whether they intend to or not.

Example: Ruben wants to teach Antonio (7) to respect women. He gets Antonio’s attention and speaks to his wife courteously in his presence, and she thanks him. (His son observes the benefits of the behavior, and is likely to repeat it.)

Example: Jan (3) idolizes her mother. She sees her mother reading everyday. She becomes an avid reader. (The strong relationship with her mother increases the likelihood of Jan imitating her behavior.)

These lessons outweigh all verbal instruction, because children view a parent’s behavior as legitimate—if Mom/Dad does that, it must be okay. Thus, a “do what I say, not what I do” philosophy won’t work, as children will most often follow the modeled behavior, not the instructed behavior.

Example: Clara (12) is caught with cigarettes. Her mother educates her on the dangers of smoking. Clara listens, but when she sees her father with a cigar, she resumes smoking and becomes addicted to nicotine. (Her father gives her legitimacy to smoke, and undermines her mother’s message.)

Example: Farah (8) picks her nose. Her father instructs her to stop. She does, but then sees her mother pick her nose. She resumes the habit. (Her mother’s behavior makes nose-picking legitimate.)

Example: Tom frequently talks to his two boys (9 and 10) about the importance of respecting others, but yells at his wife and puts her down in their presence. Both boys develop problems talking back to teachers, and one becomes verbally abusive to his mother as well. (Tom’s behavioral examples overshadow the lessons he tries to teach his sons.)

Changing to a “do what I do” plan is more likely to influence children to act in desired ways. Although positive modeling does not guarantee that a child will follow the demonstrated behavior, it improves the odds. Knowing this, parents can model proactively.

Proactive Modeling Methods

- ✓ Decide how you want your child to act and plan precisely what behaviors you will demonstrate for him or her.
- ✓ Demonstrate behaviors that could be potentially difficult for a child to learn. For boys, this might include modeling expression of feelings, sensitivity, and listening skills. Assertiveness, self-care, and body acceptance might be helpful to model for some girls.
- ✓ Choose times and settings to model these behaviors that will increase the likelihood of your child paying attention and being receptive to them (for example, when you know he or she will be in a good mood).
- ✓ Be aware of people modeling undesirable behaviors to your child, including negative role models of media, entertainment, and sports. If you cannot limit your child’s exposure to these persons, develop a strategy to model and teach corrective behaviors. You can also highlight the negative consequences of famous role models (e.g. legal, marital, financial problems) if your child appears to look up to them.
- ✓ Practice self-improvement. Taking stock of one’s own behavior, and looking at how it may be teaching a child undesirable conduct, is a difficult task for parents. However, asking for feedback from friends, other parents, or professionals can help with this process. Although challenging, understanding and changing parental behavior can have a dramatic impact on a child’s behavior. At a minimum, parents can make efforts to be more aware of their behavior when their children are present, and assume that they will mimic every negative quality a parent might display. This suggests the need to limit yelling, arguing, criticism, complaining, foul language, alcohol use, or other behaviors or expressions that parents do not want their children to repeat. Kids are smart. Even if they do not directly witness their parents’ behavior, they may still learn about it and model after it.

Instruction

Most parents use instruction frequently. This means either **teaching a child how to do something, or commanding him to carry out a behavior already mastered.** With commands, parents assume the child knows what to do and does not require teaching. It is important to make sure this is true. Also, whenever parents give commands, they must be prepared to enforce follow-through to avoid freeing and training non-compliance. Thus, parents must think carefully about what they command their child to do, be confident she is willing and able to carry out the command, and be prepared to use authority if she refuses. Explaining the rationale for a command can be helpful to sophisticated children. However, if kids question commands, empowered parents have the right to respond, "Because it is important to me that you do this."

Instruction involves explanations, prompts, and corrections to help a child master a task.

Example: Janice wants to teach her daughter Lee (12) to paint her room. First, she explains the steps involved, including preparation and clean-up. Then, she presents the materials and demonstrates how to use them. Finally, she prompts Lee to paint, giving her feedback to help her paint accurately rather than waiting for her to make a mistake. (Janice actively explains the process, models the behavior, and prompts Lee to do the job correctly.)

Since it is easier for most kids to perform a task after observing it, modeling that task before instruction improves the chances a child will learn it correctly. Participating in an activity together can also speed learning, as well as improve a parent-child bond. Instruction works better when parents present tasks in simple steps, one behavior at a time. However, the parent must consider the age and developmental level of the child to avoid patronizing her or leaving her feeling like she is too young to understand.

Example: Jay is instructing Brad (6) to wash dishes. He demonstrates first, then puts all washing materials back in place. Brad picks up the sponge, but forgets the dish soap. Before Brad starts to wash, Jay gently pushes the soap toward Brad, who reads the prompt, adds soap to the sponge, scrubs a pot, and rinses it. Jay then gives feedback on Brad's technique. (Jay instructs each basic step, prompting Brad to master them before trying more complicated steps.)

The following steps are likely to improve the frequency and accuracy of your child's response to instruction:

- ✓ Make sure you have her full attention before giving an instruction
- ✓ Use natural prompts or cues when possible

Example: Darien is teaching Rob (5) how to cross the street at an intersection. After modeling the behavior, instead of telling him when to go, she gestures to the "walk" signal, drawing Rob's attention to it, which signals him to cross. (Darien helps Rob learn the natural cue to cross.)

- ✓ Avoid commanding language—If a parent sends the message, "Here is what you do" rather than "Do this, do that," the child will likely respond with more willingness and effort
- ✓ Repeat the instruction, and prompt your child to perform tasks the same way each time so a routine develops
- ✓ Watch your child's responses closely, prompting him to perform the behavior correctly as he goes, rather than waiting for him to make a mistake and correcting it later
- ✓ Praise cooperation, effort, and attempts that come close to the target behavior
- ✓ Encourage your child to keep trying until she gets it right, and promote the idea of trial and error
- ✓ Save your best praise for appropriate responses to instructions, and correct your child's mistakes in a gentle and supportive manner, focusing on positive actions and tips for improvement
- ✓ Once a behavior is mastered, decrease praise and save it for significant accomplishments

Example: Burt is teaching his daughter Mia (7) to hit a baseball, fast pitch. After demonstrating, observing her practice swings, and giving her improvement tips, he pitches to her repeatedly. When she misses badly, he either says nothing or "Keep trying." If she comes close or tips the ball, he says, "Good, nice swing," "You almost got that one," or "Way to stay with that pitch." When she hits a pitch, he cheers and says, "Nice hit!" (Burt explains the steps, models the behavior, provides encouragement, rewards/ praises Mia for coming close to the target behavior, and then gives emphatic praise when she does it correctly. Once Mia is an accomplished batter, Burt only praises her when she hits the ball out of the infield.)

Ignoring

Ignoring should not be taken literally. Rather, this technique involves **removing attention given to a behavior to decrease or eliminate it**. The assumption behind ignoring is that a child is acting a certain way to influence a parent, but the behavior does not necessarily demand a response. For instance, a child may try to extract a reward from a parent, escape a consequence, or provoke angry or guilty feelings in a parent. These behaviors are primarily verbal, but may involve other tantrum-like behaviors such as posturing, slamming doors, etc.

When ignoring a behavior, you do not leave the room, begin a new activity, or totally shut your kid out from awareness. However, you must remove enough attention from her so that you are not engaging her or reinforcing her behavior. Ignoring is most powerful when a parent can maintain a neutral emotional expression, thus appearing “un-fazed.”

Example: Edgar (4) sits on the floor, screaming, because he wanted to watch “SpongeBob” and his mother said no. She ignores him, and he stops. After his mother ignores two more tantrums, he gives up trying to influence her in this manner. (Edgar learns that his behavior produces no payoff of any kind—getting his demands met, getting attention, or gaining power—so the behavior disappears.)

Ignoring should only be used under the following conditions:

- A child uses words or behaviors for the purpose of getting his/ her way
- A child uses words or behaviors to test or provoke a parent’s reaction, ultimately to gain power
- The language or behavior is undesirable enough so that it should be eliminated, but is not dangerous
- Parents can endure the behavior until it stops

Example: Jack (11) asks if he can go the movies before he has finished his homework. His mother says no, citing the house rule that he must complete all homework before leaving the house. Jack throws a book on the floor, huffs back to his room, and slams the door. His mother does not respond. 20 minutes later, he exits his room, calm, and apologizes. (Jack threw a tantrum in hopes of influencing his mother to give him a reward/ privilege before earning it. Without some response or reinforcement from his mother, he stops this behavior.)

Example: Jackie (9) is angry with her father because he did not allow her to sleep over a friend’s house. She calls him a “nerd” and makes other provocative comments, such as “You must have never wanted to have fun when you were my age!” He ignores her. Eventually she stops, and later tells him directly that she feels disappointed about not being allowed to go. (Her father’s lack of response forces her to change her style of emotional expression).

Common Misuses of Ignoring

× Ignoring a child’s attempts for attention

Ignoring should not be used if a child is engaging in typical attention-seeking behavior, even if it is negative. This may deprive a child of a healthy developmental need and hurt your relationship with him. If a kid is seeking attention inappropriately, then a parent’s first priority is to teach positive attention-seeking behavior, rather than ignoring the negative behavior.

× Partial Ignoring

If you initially ignore a behavior, but then give attention to it before it stops, you are rewarding a child’s persistence in that behavior—she learns that if she engages in the behavior long enough, she will get her way.

Example: Patrick (6) is bored and wants attention. He runs around the living room, diving onto the furniture. His father ignores him for 5 minutes, but Patrick plays more wildly. Dad finally asks, “Are you bored? If you want to play with me, just say so.” (Since Patrick is seeking attention, ignoring does not work, and his behavior escalates. Dad’s ultimate attention reinforces this disruptive behavior, teaching Patrick that to get attention, he must be wild *and* persistent. Dad’s instruction for Patrick to seek attention positively—through verbal expression—is helpful, but would be more effective if Dad had done this immediately, and had not initially ignored Patrick.)

× Ignoring aggression

Ignoring should not be used for dangerous behaviors (e.g. fighting, self-injury, property damage), as children typically use these behaviors to get attention, and ignoring them may result in harmful consequences.

× Unsuccessful ignoring

If ignoring obviously does not work or increases your child’s anger or agitation, try another tool and do not repeat the ignoring technique in similar situations. However, ignoring may still be effective in other situations at a later time.

Natural Consequences

Natural consequences involve **allowing a child to experience consequences that normally occur following a behavior**. This challenging but humane technique teaches kids the limits of their behavior, which also helps prepare them to act appropriately in situations such as school, relationships, employment, and other social interactions. Natural consequences allow kids to truly learn from their mistakes. Furthermore, when parents use this technique, they do not have to invent new consequences or punishments (which may not be relevant to the child's behavior) to teach their kid a lesson.

Parents must continually educate children about potential consequences of their behavior so that they are never surprised when their behavior brings about a negative result. Thus, once informed, if a child behaves irresponsibly, his parents do not protect him from the consequence or try to fix things for him. In cases of children with significant learning or attention problems, parents must use modeling/ instruction and work proactively to ensure kids understand potential consequences of actions, as they may have a decreased ability to anticipate consequences.

Example: Ari (11) gets kicked off the soccer team for fighting. He asks his parents to convince the coach to change his mind. They decline, and explain that when he fights, this is the type of result he can expect. (Using the natural consequence, Ari's parents do not have to create new consequences to address his fighting behavior, since his coach addressed it properly—at the point where the behavior occurred.)

Example: Contrary to her parents' instructions, Cathy (7) does not put away the pieces of a new board game they bought for her. Her 3-year-old sister finds the game and plays with it, and several pieces are lost. Cathy asks them to replace the game, but they decline. (Her parents expect her to take care of her possessions. Since Cathy fails to do this, and fails to listen to her parents' feedback, they do not rescue her from the natural consequences. Thus, Cathy associates loss with her failure to be responsible and listen.)

Natural Consequences may also involve giving a child a "real world" consequence for a behavior. Thus, whatever outcome kids would normally encounter following a certain behavior in their social environment, a parent can give them.

Example: Ray (6) repeatedly cheats during a game at home with his family. His parents try other techniques and warn him repeatedly, but he continues, so they eject him from the game. (Ejection is the "real world" response to cheating.)

Example: Teresa catches her daughter Veronica (11) writing graffiti on a neighbor's wall. She makes her apologize to the neighbor and paint the wall, then grounds her for two weeks. (Teresa's actions resemble a judge's sentence and motivate Veronica to not repeat the behavior.)

Other examples of natural consequences

Toddlers and Preschoolers

Behavior: child refuses to wear shoes

Consequence: no outside play until shoes worn

Behavior: child fails to pick up toys

Consequence: toys are put in storage for several days and must be earned back for child to use

Behavior: child tantrums to get something

Consequence: child gets nothing until calm

Behavior: child acts out at a restaurant

Consequence: child cannot go to restaurants again until demonstrates improvement in behavior

Behavior: child refuses to eat dinner, but wants cake

Consequence: no cake until dinner eaten

Older Children

Behavior: child nags parents to get something

Consequence: child does not get wanted item or privilege until asks appropriately (without nagging) and complies with parents' demands

Behavior: child fails to complete expected tasks (chores, homework)

Consequence: no privileges until tasks completed

Behavior: child displays poor sportsmanship

Consequence: others decline to play with child

Behavior: child refuses to wear seatbelt

Consequence: car does not move (until belt on)

Behavior: child breaks or steals something

Consequence: child pays to replace damaged or stolen item (and must work to earn \$\$ to pay)

Behavior: child refuses to pay for above item

Consequence: no new items until debts paid

Don't give in to guilt

Using natural consequences may leave you feeling guilty, thinking that you have failed as a parent or that you have hurt your child, especially if she complains, protests, or plays on your guilt. Be prepared for this feeling and try to remain objective without giving in to the protests. Remember, consequences for problem behaviors are "natural" and teach children the lessons they need to survive in the real world, where no one is going to give them a break. When you use natural consequences, you are doing your child a big favor, not hurting her.

Punishment & Fining

Tools to Avoid

People use the word “punish” in a variety of contexts, but punishment is defined clinically as **giving an unpleasant or painful consequence in response to a behavior to discourage that behavior.**

Example: Maurice (9) talks excessively during baseball practice. His coach makes him run laps. (Having to do extra work—combined with the humiliation of being singled out for talking—is a punishment designed to discourage future disruptions.)

Forms of Punishment

- Pain or discomfort (typically in the form of striking, but may include infliction of emotional pain, such as verbal abuse and yelling)
- Work (extra chores, excessive physical exercise)
- Public humiliation, excessive isolation, or excessive physical restraint

Fining, another aversive technique, refers to **taking away something meaningful to discourage a behavior**—like rewarding in reverse. The legal system frequently uses this technique to discourage illegal behavior. Parents’ use of fining is no different.

Example: Jillian (11) does not complete her homework. Dad reduces her allowance 50%. (Taking away money, which Jillian values, is intended to increase her motivation to complete homework.)

Why do we use punishment and fining?

- These techniques tend to have the immediate effect of stopping a problem behavior—for the short term. They appear to work.
- We learned from our parents because they used the techniques on us, and according to our memory, they worked.

The problems with punishment and fining¹

- They can cause a child to avoid the parent giving the punishment and damage the relationship between the child and that parent.
- They can cause anger and aggression, as well as excessive shyness, self-esteem problems, and a persistent sense of being “bad.” Physical punishment can traumatize children and, based on modeling principles, teaches them that hitting or aggression can help them get their needs met.

¹ From Donnellan, A. and LaVigna, G. (1988). *Progress without punishment*. New York: Teachers College Press.

More problems with punishment and fining

- They do not teach alternative behaviors and may discourage desired behaviors in a child.

Example: Lisa (6) plays a board game with her mother, but uses a piece to scratch herself. Her mother takes the game away as a fine. Lisa stops scratching herself, but stops playing games with her mother. (Lisa needs to learn more appropriate behaviors and uses of the game pieces. However, her mother’s fine does not provide her with this opportunity, and removes what could be a positive bonding experience.)

- Children learn to avoid getting caught—they avoid a problem behavior with certain people or environments, but continue the behavior when they believe they can get away with it. In other words, punishment teaches children to get around the rules rather than to follow them.
- They don’t work over time. Research shows that behavioral effects of punishment wear off after a short time, and must be repeated frequently to sustain decreases of problem behaviors.

Example: Bill (8) eats a giant bag of Hot Cheetos, gets very sick, and insists he will never eat them again. Two weeks later, he does it again with the same result. (The over-eating essentially delivers a punishment to Bill, but after a short period of time, the effect of this punishment wears off and the lesson is not retained.)

Uses of Punishment and Fining

- Don’t use punishment. It won’t help your relationship with your children.
- Use fining only as a last result, only with severe behaviors, and only after other tools have been tried repeatedly and failed.
- Use fining as a natural consequence. The child may lose something, but it is realistic to how the world works (see **Natural Consequences**).
- Rather than giving rewards and taking them away, set up a system so that when a child misbehaves, existing rewards are not taken away, but the child must wait longer or improve behavior to receive new rewards. This represents **delayed rewarding**.
- Instead of grounding children, or taking away their freedom as a consequence of undesirable behavior, re-define the concept of freedom as a reward that must be earned with good behavior, rather than an entitlement.

USC Center for Work and Family Life

3375 S. Hoover Suite E206

Los Angeles, CA 90007

(213) 821-0800

www.usc.edu/worklife

jsackett@usc.edu