UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
EXTENSION
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

FCS2200

Working With School-Age Children, Part 1: Preventing Misbehavior[1]

Millie Ferrer, Ann Fugate, and Ingrid Rivera[2]

Introduction

Whether you work in an after-school program, volunteer with a 4-H club, or are involved with another youth program, one of the things you probably like best about your position is the children. School-age children can be a lot of fun–they are curious and social and have a sense of humor. One of the more stressful parts of your position is probably behavior management. For a number of reasons, all children will misbehave at some time. When they do, you do not simply want to stop their misbehavior–you want to teach them what to do instead. Part 1 of this series talks about ways to prevent misbehavior, and Part 2 discusses ways to handle children's misbehavior.

As you read about the following strategies to prevent misbehavior, think about what you already do well and what you might try. All of the effort you put into preventing misbehavior is effort well spent. It is easier to prevent misbehavior than to deal with it afterwards. More importantly, as you prevent misbehavior, you are also enabling children to succeed in your program.

Get to Know the Children You Work with

Your knowledge of the children you work with will help you in your efforts to prevent misbehavior. When you get to know the children, you will better understand what they can do and what they like to do. Understanding this, you will be able to make rules they can follow and plan activities that they will enjoy and learn from. You will also help to prevent anger, frustration, and shame that often leads to misbehavior.

1. This document is FCS2200, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication: July 2002 . Reviewed by Judy Butterfield, 4-H Extension Agent, Melinda H. Souers, 4-H Extension Agent, and Stephanie Toelle, FCS Extension Agent. Please visit the EDIS Web site at **http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu**

2. Millie Ferrer, Ph.D., associate professor, Anne Fugate, M.Ed., former coordinator Educational/Training Programs, Ingrid Rivera, Ed.S., graduate assistant, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

Develop Individual Relationships

The most important thing you can do to prevent misbehavior–and to help the children you work with succeed in general–is to develop a genuine, positive relationship with each child. A good relationship with you will go a long way in encouraging good behavior. Try these tips to begin a positive relationship with each child you work with:

- Greet the child warmly and let him know you are glad to see him.
- Ask the child about her day.
- Tell the child what you like and admire about him. Be as specific as possible in your praise.

Consider Children's Individual Temperaments

An important part of getting to know the children you work with is getting to know their individual temperaments. Temperament is the physical and emotional traits that children are born with. It affects how they feel inside themselves and how they see and respond to the world. Temperament is made up of a number of traits, including:

- Level of activity–how active is the child generally?
- Adaptability–how well does the child deal with transition and change?
- Mood–what is the child's basic mood, more negative or more positive?
- Distractibility–how easily is the child distracted? Can the child pay attention?

Think about the children you work with. Is one or more of the children very active? Does one child seem to get upset with changes in the schedule? Does another child have a continually sunny disposition? Or perhaps another child happily start projects, but then wanders off to look out the window or talk to a friend.

A child's temperament influences how easy or hard it is for them to handle certain situations. For example, a very active child would have an easy time keeping up during an all--day field trip. She would have a harder time sitting still to do her homework and then listening to a story. If she were asked to be quiet and sit still for a long time, she would probably become restless and frustrated.

Keep the temperaments of the children you work with in mind as you think about the environment, activities, and rules of your program. How easy or hard is it for children of different temperaments to succeed in the environment? What can you do to make each child's participation more successful? For a few ideas about what you can do, look at Table 1, *Ideas for meeting the needs of children with different temperaments*.

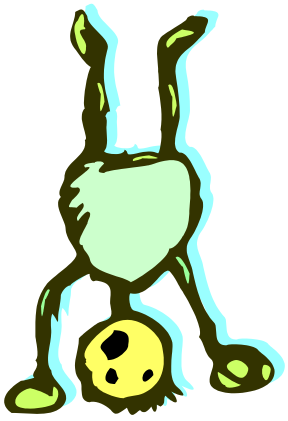

Table 1: Ideas for meeting the needs of children with different temperaments.

• **If a child tends...**	• **Try these ideas:**
• to be very active	• Plan a variety of activities, including some active games that let children work off their energy. • Include physical activity in all kinds of learning activities. For example, if you are teaching children about how trees draw water through their roots, have the group act out the process.
• not to adapt well	• Help children with transitions between activities. For example, say “In ten minutes we are going outside to play tag. Get to a stopping place in your projects.” Then five minutes later, remind children they should be cleaning their work area. • If a change in schedule is coming up, talk to children about it several days in advance. For example, on Monday say “We’re going to the fire department on Thursday,” and tell them about the things they will see. Then remind them of their trip on Tuesday and Wednesday.
• to be moody	• Understand that children’s overall mood influences their reaction to things. For example, a child with a more negative mood may really have enjoyed a field trip, but may not express his enjoyment as loudly or clearly as a more positive child. • Ask children questions that help them focus on the positive aspects of things. For example, ask “What did you like best about our field trip?”
• to be easily distracted	• Provide a quiet area without pictures or windows for doing homework or reading. • Recall children’s attention to activities with prompts. For example, say “Megan, we have four colors of paint. What color are you going to paint your flowerpot?”

Learn Appropriate Expectations for the Developmental Stages of Children

If you learn about how children develop, you will know what is reasonable to expect of the children you work with. Look at Table 2, *Development of children ages 5-11.* It shows how children ages 5-11 change as they grow. For example, younger school-age children try hard to do things perfectly, so they tend to get upset when they lose. On the other hand, older school-age children tend to be more confident about their skills and to like competing. If you plan a competitive game for the older children, you can adapt it for the younger ones. Have the younger children compete against themselves, not against each other. The younger children will still have a chance to test their skills. They are also less likely to become angry or feel ashamed.

There is much more to learn about the developmental characteristics of children than is in Table 2. For more information, contact your local Cooperative Extension Agent.

Table 2: Development of children ages 5-11.

	5-6 years old	7-8 years old	9-11 years old
Physical development	• They have control of their major muscles– they can run, skip, gallop, tumble, and dance to music. • They are learning small muscle skills, such as tying shoelaces, cutting on a line with scissors, and copying shapes.	• They have a good sense of balance and enjoy testing their large muscle skills (e.g., doing cartwheels or catching a fly ball). • They can print with a pencil and use scissors and other small tools well.	• They continue to increase strength, hand dexterity, coordination, and reaction time. • They may begin to show signs of puberty, especially girls, who are generally 6-24 months ahead of boys in physical maturity.
Intellectual development	• They are concrete thinkers: they need to see, feel, hear, smell, and taste. • They enjoy trying out materials and skills, rather than creating finished products	• They are still concrete thinkers, but are learning to plan ahead. • They still enjoy exploring, rather than finishing projects.	• They are capable of understanding concepts without direct experience. • They want to learn adult skills and create useful products
Social and emotional development	• They play best in smaller groups ("best friends only"), and sometimes need alone time. • They like to test their skills but are not emotionally ready for competition. • They take right and wrong as what adults say it is.	• They prefer playmates of the same sex. • They find criticism and failure hard to handle and look to adults for love and support. • They view things as right or wrong, with little middle ground.	• They begin to see adults as imperfect and peer approval becomes more important. • Their interest in competitive events (sports or otherwise) increases. • They begin to evaluate the right and wrong of individual situations.

Structure the Environment to Encourage Appropriate Behavior

The environment affects behavior by making it harder or easier for children to feel comfortable, follow rules, and enjoy activities. Suppose, for example, that the rule is to clean up after an activity. The children will have an easier time following this rule if there are storage boxes on low shelves. Or suppose that a child is distracted by noise and activity. He will have an easier time concentrating if he has a quiet area to go to. Most likely the environment you have to work with is not ideal. However, you will prevent misbehavior if you adapt the environment to the needs of the children as much as possible. As you think about what you can do, consider the following tips:

- *As much as possible, give children some control over their environment.* Try to provide areas where children can work alone or work with friends. Also provide areas where they can run around or sit to work on

a project. If your space is not large enough to have many permanent areas, be flexible. Let a child create his own quiet area by pulling his chair off to the side.

- *Set up activities in the most appropriate place.* This will let children enjoy activities and minimize wear and tear on the surroundings. For example, set up the craft area near the sink, so that cleaning up paint or glue will be easier. Or set up the homework area in a quiet corner away from the games. Easily distracted children will find it easier to stay on task in a quiet area.
- *Provide places to store backpacks, materials, and unfinished projects.* Accessible storage space will enable children to clean up after themselves and to work on projects at their own pace.
- *Provide appropriate materials.* For example, when children work on a craft project, have enough scissors so that sharing is workable, not a frustration likely to lead to squabbling.

While not part of the physical space, routines are also an important part of the structure of your program. Show the children you work with what to do when they arrive at your program. Also show them how to clean up after themselves and how to transition between activities. You might want to post a schedule of when things are done. At first you may need to spend some time with the children practicing routines and learning the schedule, but it saves time in the long run. If the children already know what is expected of them, you do not have to explain what to do every day.

Plan Interesting Activities

Children are less likely to misbehave if they are interested in what they are doing. Plan activities that the children will learn from and enjoy. The activities do not have to be elaborate or to require expensive materials. Give school-age children open-ended materials such as markers, paper, old magazines, clay, blocks, appliance boxes, and dress-up clothes. They will happily create their own stories and games. If you have any doubts about what interests them, just ask them!

When possible, give children choices about their activities. For example, during quiet time, let children choose whether they would rather read, do a puzzle, or draw. Or, if you are talking about a topic such as friendship, let children choose to share their ideas through writing, drawing, or role-play.

Establish Rules for Behavior

Establishing a good set of rules will prevent some misbehavior. Children feel more secure when rules let them know what is expected of them. When you establish rules, follow these guidelines:

- *Limit the number of rules.* Have as few rules as possible, just enough to make it clear how people and property should be treated. If there are too many rules, both you and the children will be overwhelmed. To limit the

number, do not make a rule for every action. Instead, make a general rule that covers several actions. For example, do not make the separate rules "no name- calling" and "no teasing." Instead, make the rule, "respect each other."

- *State rules positively.* A positively stated rule does not simply tell children what not to do–it tells them what they should do. For example, instead of "do not leave a mess," state the rule as "clean up after yourself."
- *Have the children help make some of the rules.* By age seven or eight, children are more likely to follow rules that they help make. Involve children in making rules by asking how everyone needs to act to get along and take care of things. Often, younger children will respond with a long list of very specific rules. Most of their suggestions will be phrased negatively. Shape their suggestions into a short positive list. When you begin the discussion, explain that you have the final say about the rules they suggest.
- *Make sure every child understands the rules.* Post them and explain the reason for each rule. Have the children give you examples of what each rule means. For example, for the rule "respect each other," the children could tell you that it means "not making fun of someone" or "not hitting each other."
- *Decide on the consequences for breaking the rules and make sure the children understand them.* Consequences need to be directly related to the misbehavior. For example, a child did not follow the rule to clean up after a project. The consequence is that he must stay to clean up while the other children begin the next activity. Knowing the consequences beforehand teaches children that they are responsible for how they choose to behave.

Very important! Once you have made rules for your program, make sure to enforce them consistently. Even if your set of rules is really good, if you do not enforce them consistently, they will be ineffective.

Model Positive Behavior

In addition to having rules, you teach children what to do and not do by your own example. One of the simplest ways to encourage positive behavior is to model it. Behave the way you want the children to behave. For example, if you want them to respect others, model respect yourself. Say "please" and "thank you" when you talk to them. Be calm, patient, and considerate. Children remember how adults act and will imitate their behavior in similar situations.

Summary

The strategies in this fact sheet will help you create a positive environment for children and prevent misbehavior. However, no matter how much planning and effort you put into prevention, children will still misbehave sometimes. See Part 2 of **Working with School-Age Children** about how to enforce rules and otherwise handle misbehavior.

References

Crosiar, S.J., Sanger, K., Birckmayer, J., & Spedding, P. 1995. Training school-age child care staff. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

Garbarino, J., and Bedard, C. 2001. *Parents under siege: Why you are the solution, not the problem in your child's life.* New York: The Free Press.

Nuttall, P. 1991. Middle childhood development. Retrieved January 28, 2002 from National Network for Child Care Web site: http://www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/prim.dev.html.

Nuttall, P. 1991. Primary child development. Retrieved January 28, 2002 from National Network for Child Care Web site: http://www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/prim.dev.html

Oesterreich, L. 1995. Ages and stages: Five-year olds. Retrieved January 28, 2002 from National Network for Child Care Web site: http://www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/ages.stages.5y.html

Oesterreich, L. 1995. Ages and stages: Six through eight-year olds. Retrieved January 28, 2002 from National Network for Child Care Web site: http://www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/ages.stages.6y.8y.html

Oesterreich, L. 1995. Ages and stages: Nine through eleven-year olds. Retrieved January 28, 2002 from National Network for Child Care Web site: http://www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/ages.stages.9y.11y.html

Temke, M., and Clement, A. 1996. Discipline: Teaching school age children social skills. Retrieved January 30, 2002 from University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Web site: http://ceinfo.unh.edu/sch_s_skills.pdf

Todd, C. 1992. Establishing rules. Retrieved January 30, 2002 from National Network for Child Care Web site: http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/ sac16_estab.rules.html

Turecki, S. 1989. *The difficult child*. New York: Bantam Books.