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Working With School-Age Children, Part 2: Discipline¹

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Introduction

As you learned in *Working with School-Age Children, Part 1: Preventing Misbehavior* is an important part of successful behavior management. Using prevention strategies can reduce problems and create a healthy environment. This allows children to become more successful, confident, and happy. A lot can be done to prevent misbehavior. This includes getting to know the children you work with and structuring the child's environment. You can also establish rules for behavior and plan interesting activities. However, no matter how much effort you put into prevention, children will still misbehave. This fact sheet will teach you strategies to use when children misbehave. First, though, let's look at possible reasons for misbehavior.

Reasons for Misbehavior

Children misbehave for a number of reasons. Look at **Table 1, Determining the cause of misbehavior** on page 2. In the second column are questions to ask yourself as you think about their misbehavior. Asking yourself these questions can help you determine the best strategies to use in managing children's behaviors. In the next few

pages, you will find some strategies to consider when disciplining children.



Discipline Strategies

When disciplining children, you can use a number of strategies. The strategy you choose depends on the temperament of the child, his age, and his reason for misbehavior. Remember, the goal of discipline is to teach children to take responsibility for their actions and to exercise self-control.

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Table 1: Determining the cause of misbehavior

| Possible reasons for misbehavior. | Ask yourself: |
|--|--|
| <i>Boredom</i> | Is the child interested in the activity? |
| <i>Unmet physical needs</i> | Is the child tired, hungry or sick? |
| <i>Inappropriate environment</i> | Is the environment set up so that it is easy for children to behave? |
| <i>Unclear rules</i> | Does the child know how he is expected to behave? |
| <i>Inappropriate expectations for the developmental stage of the child</i> | Is the child expected to do activities or follow rules that he is too young or old to follow? |
| <i>Unmet emotional needs</i> | Does the child get enough attention? Are the child's feelings respected? Does the child receive enough structure and guidance from adults? Does the child feel capable? |
| <i>Situation</i> | Is the child simply responding to an incident that just happened? (e.g., a classmate taking his crayon). |
| <i>Family dynamics</i> | Is the child's behavior a reflection of the way he's treated at home? |
| <i>Difference in temperament</i> | Is the child's misbehavior a result of a temperamental trait? |

Be Firm and Kind

Being firm does not mean being harsh or rigid. It also does not mean yelling, threatening, or being unkind. Being firm is meaning what you say. It means using a calm tone to let children know that you are serious about what you want them to do. It can be used with school-age children and it is very effective if it is used consistently. Here are some guidelines to help you use this strategy:

- When you do not want to give children choices, avoid asking them to do things. For example, do not say "Phoebe, can you clean up the glitter?" Instead, say "Phoebe, please clean up the glitter."
- When you tell a child to do something, she may not like it. It is sometimes difficult for a child to switch activities, so she may feel angry or frustrated. It is important to acknowledge these feelings in an empathetic way. For example, say "It's frustrating to stop what you're doing when you're having so much fun."

- When you give children directions, they may argue or plead with you. Do not argue with them. You do not want to get into a power struggle. For example, if Phoebe



refuses to cooperate the first time, say "Phoebe, I know it's frustrating to stop what you're doing, but I need your cooperation with cleaning up the glitter."

- If Phoebe continues to refuse, apply the appropriate consequence.

Apply Consequences

As stated in *Working with School-Age Children, Part 1*, you need to make sure the children you work with understand rules and consequences. Then, when a rule is broken, apply the agreed-upon consequence. Remember, the consequences you apply need to relate directly to a child's misbehavior. For example, if the rule is "we take care of property" and a child throws board game pieces across the room, the consequence is that the child may not play with the game until the following day.

Always enforce rules consistently. Inconsistency confuses the child. It teaches him that he can sometimes misbehave with out consequence. Keep in mind that younger children may need more frequent reminders than older children.

Follow these simple steps when applying consequences:

- When a rule is broken the first time, calmly remind the child of the rule. For example, if Billy is pushing his teammates during kickball, say "Billy, the rule is we respect each other. This means we don't push each other."
- If the rule is broken a second time, calmly and firmly restate the rule and apply the consequence for the misbehavior. For example, if Billy continues to push his teammates, say "Billy, the rule is we respect each other. Please sit out until the next game starts."

Redirect

Redirection involves focusing a child to a more appropriate activity. It is a useful strategy if a child is about to break a rule or if she is off-task. Following are tips for redirecting children:

- Remind the child what she is supposed to be doing. For example, say "Sally, you need to

finish your homework before you can play on the computer."

- Offer the child a choice whenever possible. For example, if Joey is talking to a friend instead of cleaning up, say "Joey, would you like to pick up the glue bottles or put away the paints?"



Ignore Misbehavior and Acknowledge Positive Behavior

Sometimes children misbehave simply because they want your attention, even if it is negative attention. If a child misbehaves but is not breaking any rules, such as when they whine or complain, you can ignore a child's behavior. Below are two guidelines to safely ignoring children's behavior:

- Be aware of what the child is doing and make sure that she is safe.
- Tell the child that you will give her your undivided attention as soon as she stops the unwanted behavior. For example, say "Sam, I will listen to you as soon as you stop complaining about not getting your way."

Ignoring misbehavior lets a child know that his behavior is not appropriate. On the other hand, acknowledging a child's appropriate behavior reinforces how you would like him to behave. Acknowledging their behavior makes children feel good about themselves. It also teaches them that they do not have to misbehave to get your attention. As a result, misbehavior decreases and appropriate behavior increases. Following are a few tips to help you acknowledge the

behaviors you want the children you work with to exhibit:

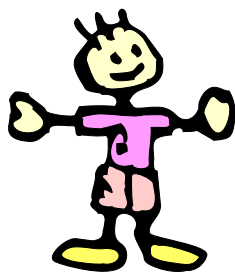
- Focus on the action, not the child. Telling the child “You are the best!” sets unrealistic expectations for the child that she will not be able to achieve.
- Be specific. For example, instead of saying “You are being so good!” say “Sandy, I love the way you are taking turns in playing the game.”
- Make it a habit to find at least one positive behavior from each child every day.

Say “Yes” If Possible

Instead of simply saying “no” to children’s requests when the timing is not right, try a different approach. For example, if a child asks to play on the computer but she has not finished her homework, say “Yes, Becky, you may play on the computer as soon as you finish your homework.” This teaches children that there is an appropriate time to do different activities.

Teach Problem-Solving Skills

In most cases, children can solve their disagreements with friends if they are taught a few simple guidelines. Teaching children to solve problems will allow them to become more socially competent.



Sometimes it seems children argue over every little thing. They are in the process of learning communication and social skills, such as negotiation and compromise. Teach children to reach compromises by following these steps:

- If you notice that children are unable to reach a compromise, step in and coach them. For example, ask them “What do you need to do to solve this problem?”
- After the children list several suggestions, ask them to agree on a solution. If both children agree on a safe solution, allow the children to use it.

In addition to learning how to compromise, school-age children are learning how to make friends and how to get along with others. This also includes learning how to respond when others mistreat them. You can coach children on how to tell others when they are not treating them well. Teach the child to tell the other person:

- what the person is doing that is bothering him
- how the person’s behavior makes him feel; and what he wants.

These steps do not have to be followed in any particular order. For example, a child can say “When you call me names I get angry and I want you to stop.” He could also say, “I get angry when you call me names so please stop.”

Call a “Break”

This strategy is very similar to time-out, but it can also be effective with older school-age children. A break is not meant to be a punishment. Rather, it is meant to be a time for children to calm down when they are angry or frustrated.

It is very important for you to remain calm when you tell a child to take a break. Call a break when you notice the child needs it, and not out of your own anger or frustration. When used correctly, many children feel the benefits of taking a break and may take one on



their own when they feel they are losing self-control.

In order for a break to be effective, you must explain how it works when children are calm. This way, when you call a break, the child knows exactly what to do. Choose a quiet, uninteresting place away from the rest of the children as your break site. The following steps will serve as guidelines in the use of breaks:

- When you notice a child needs a break, acknowledge the child's feelings in a calm manner and tell him that he needs a break. For example, say "I can see that you are very angry right now. You will feel better after taking a break.
- If the child resists, avoid getting into a conversation, giving into pleas, arguing, or trying to convince the child. Simply repeat that he needs to take a break.
- When the child is calm, invite him to come back to the group.

Practice What You've Learned

Now that you have learned some prevention and discipline strategies to use with school-age children, practice what you've learned. Look below at **Table 2, Scenarios**, on page 6. Column 1 lists some typical situations you may experience in working with school-age children. Read the situation and identify the possible reason for the child's misbehavior. Next, decide how you would handle the situation. Then, think of what you can do to prevent future misbehavior. Refer to *Working with School-Age Children, Part 1* for suggestions. Once you have decided what you would do in these situations, compare your answers to the ones in **Table 3, Possible responses**, on pages 7 and 8.

Conclusion

The discipline strategies discussed in this fact sheet can be used to deal with children's misbehavior quickly and effectively. However, behavior management does not end with taking care of an incident. Prevention is the key to decreasing misbehavior. If you take the time to prevent misbehavior and discipline the children in your program when necessary, you will help them become more responsible, happy, and self-confident.

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Table 2: Scenarios

| Scenario | Possible reason for misbehavior | Immediate action | Future prevention strategy |
|--|--|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| The children have been building bird feeders for the last three days. Jimmy is already finished with his project and is wandering around the room distracting the other children. | | | |
| Ana and Roberta, both six years old, are playing with Legos. Carrie comes up to them and asks if she can play with them. You overhear Roberta say, "Go away! We don't like you!" | | | |
| You have invited a zookeeper to speak to your 4-H club about his job for an hour. Most of the 4-Hers are eight years old. The children begin to fidget after 30 minutes and not pay attention, despite the speaker being animated and having props. | | | |
| Lakisha and Amanda are setting up a board game. You hear them argue about who will go first. | | | |
| While playing soccer, Rhonda and Lisa get into an argument about the rules of the game and it looks like they are about to hit each other. | | | |
| The children are out playing kickball. You suddenly realize that they are running late to go to the computer lab. You immediately tells the children that it's time to go inside. Jason, who usually enjoys going to the lab, gets angry and yells, "I don't want to go to the stupid computer lab! I want to stay outside playing!" | | | |

Table 3: Possible responses

| Scenario | Possible reason for misbehavior | Immediate action | Future prevention strategy |
|---|---|---|---|
| The children have been building bird feeders for the last three days. Jimmy is already finished with his project and is wandering around the room distracting the other children. | Boredom | Redirect Jimmy. He can help his friend Joey build another bird feeder. He can also look up information about what birds in the area like to eat. | Have an alternate activity planned in case a child does not want to do a particular activity or if a child finishes early. |
| Ana and Roberta, both six years old, are playing with Legos. Carrie comes up to them and asks if she can play with them. You overhear Roberta say, "Go away! We don't like you!" | Development stage of the children. Note: Ana and Roberta are not being unkind intentionally. It is sometimes difficult for five and six-year olds to play with more than one playmate at a time. It is also difficult for them to add another element, such as another person, to a game they have already started. | Carrie will probably feel hurt by Roberta's comment. Acknowledge Carrie's feelings and direct her to another activity of her choice. Tell Ana and Roberta that what they said was not nice. Ask them how they would feel if Carrie had said that to them. Coach Ana and Roberta on how they could tell Carrie that they don't want to play with her right now without hurting her feelings. | Continue to model kind behavior, and remind the children of the rule of kindness and respect. Whenever necessary, coach children on appropriate behavior. |
| You have invited a zookeeper to speak to your 4-H club about his job for an hour. Most of the 4-Hers are eight years old. The children begin to fidget after 30 minutes and not pay attention, despite the speaker being animated and having props. | Inappropriate expectation for the developmental stage of the children. | Remind the children that the rule is "we respect others," and in the case of a guest speaker, that means we listen quietly. | When planning programs, keep the developmental stages of children in mind. In this case, ask the zookeeper to keep his presentation to a maximum of 25 minutes. |
| Lakisha and Amanda are setting up a board game. You hear them argue about who will go first. | Situation | Ignore misbehavior. If you see the children trying to find a solution on their own, do not get involved. However, if the situation is getting out of control, take action. Coach the children on how to find a solution. | Continue to coach problem-solving techniques until children practice them on their own. |
| While playing soccer, Rhonda and Lisa get into an argument about the rules of the game and it looks like they are about to hit each other. | Situation | Tell Lisa and Rhonda to take a break to cool off. | Before starting the game, remind the children of the game rules they all agreed upon and discuss the consequences of misbehavior. |

| Scenario | Possible reason for misbehavior | Immediate action | Future prevention strategy |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>The children are out playing kickball. You suddenly realize that they are running late to go to the computer lab. She immediately tells the children that it's time to go inside. Jason, who usually enjoys going to the lab, gets angry and yells, "I don't want to go to the stupid computer lab! I want to stay outside playing!"</p> | <p>Temperament Note: Because of their temperament, some children may have a difficult time switching quickly from one activity to another.</p> | <p>Acknowledge Jason's feelings of frustration. Then, in a calm and firm manner, tell him that it is time to go inside and avoid arguing with him. If he is still upset when he gets to the computer lab, have him take a break before using the computer.</p> | <p>Give children a signal several minutes before it's time to come in.</p> |