

Why Kids Do What They Do — And How to Help Them Do Better

Practical behavior strategies for home & school (Elementary & Middle School Parents)

- **All behavior has a reason:** Behavior is a form of communication — it reflects internal states, needs, or skills children may not yet have the words for.
- **Kids repeat behaviors that work for them:** Children learn through experience — if a behavior gets them what they need, it's likely to be repeated.
- **Our job as adults is to teach skills, reduce stress, and make good behavior worth it:** Supportive adults model, teach, and reinforce helpful behaviors — making them more effective and appealing to repeat.
- **Applicable to all children:** Whether neurotypical or with ADHD, autism, anxiety, or learning differences — these principles support every child's development.



Photo by Santi Vedri on Unsplash

A Simple Truth About Behavior

- **Behavior is communication:** Children express unmet needs, emotions, or confusion through actions rather than words, especially when under stress or lacking skills.
- **Behavior helps kids get attention, avoid demands, or gain access:** Common behavior motives include seeking interaction, escaping difficult tasks, or accessing preferred activities — all are normal but need guidance.
- **Behavior helps regulate emotions:** Self-soothing or sensory behaviors often help kids regain a sense of calm and control, even if they look disruptive.
- **Not defiance — unmet needs or missing skills:** Challenging behavior is rarely about being 'bad' — more often it's a response to stress or a gap in skills and understanding.



Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

Reinforcement (The Engine of Behavior)

- **Reinforcement increases future behavior:** When a behavior results in something desirable, it's more likely to be repeated. This is the foundation of learning and habit formation.
- **Positive reinforcement: adding something good:** This includes praise, rewards, or privileges added after a behavior — like extra screen time for completing homework.
- **Negative reinforcement: removing something unpleasant:** Taking away an aversive element (e.g., giving a break or stopping nagging) increases the likelihood of a behavior recurring.
- **Negative reinforcement is not punishment:** Unlike punishment, negative reinforcement is still about increasing positive behavior — not causing discomfort or fear.

Real-Life Examples (Home & School)

- **Positive reinforcement at home:** Example: Child finishes homework and earns an extra 10 minutes of screen time — reinforcing completion with a desirable outcome.
- **Positive reinforcement at school:** Example: Student handles disappointment calmly and earns praise or gets a classroom privilege — promoting emotional regulation.
- **Negative reinforcement at home:** Example: Child asks for a break and is allowed to step out of a noisy room — reducing stress and reinforcing self-advocacy.
- **Negative reinforcement at school:** Example: Student finishes a task and teacher stops nagging — reinforcing timely task completion by removing pressure.
- **These strategies are universally effective:** Not just for kids in therapy — all children benefit from strategic use of reinforcement.

Why Punishment Often Backfires

- **Punishment stops behavior temporarily:** It may suppress behavior in the short term, but without teaching a better alternative, it often leads to recurrence.
- **Punishment doesn't teach what to do instead:** Kids need guidance toward replacement behaviors — simply removing a behavior leaves a void.
- **Punishment increases stress and power struggles:** Harsh consequences can escalate anxiety, resistance, or emotional shutdown — especially in sensitive or neurodivergent children.
- **Reinforcement builds long-term skills:** Focusing on teaching and rewarding appropriate behavior creates lasting behavior change and emotional growth.
- **The goal is competence, not control:** When kids feel capable and supported, they are more likely to engage in positive behaviors consistently.

Teaching “What TO Do” (Differential Reinforcement)

- **Focus on teaching replacement behaviors:** Instead of trying to stop the negative behavior, guide children toward a more appropriate behavior that serves the same need.
- **Reward the positive replacement:** Reinforce the desired behavior immediately and meaningfully to increase its likelihood of being repeated.
- **Reduce attention to problem behavior:** Minimize reactions to unwanted behavior while redirecting focus and reinforcement to preferred alternatives.
- **Example: Calm requests vs. yelling:** Ignore yelling, but respond quickly and positively to a calm request — reinforcing communication over outbursts.
- **Works across settings:** Effective in homes, classrooms, sports, and social contexts — consistency builds skills across environments.

When Kids Need Motivation (Tokens & Rewards)

- **Tokens serve as training wheels for motivation:** They provide visible, tangible encouragement to help children stay on track as they learn and build habits.
- **Helps build delayed gratification:** Kids can see progress toward a goal, making it easier to wait or work through challenging tasks.
- **Examples: sticker charts, points, earn-and-exchange:** Using visuals like charts or point systems helps kids understand what's expected and how they're progressing.
- **Tokens are not bribes:** When used intentionally, tokens reward effort and learning — not manipulation or short-term compliance.



Photo by Mel Poole on Unsplash

Why Timing Matters (Motivation & Cues)



Motivation fluctuates with internal states
Kids are more likely to struggle when tired, hungry, overstimulated, or emotionally overwhelmed — timing impacts behavior.



We can adjust expectations based on timing
Understanding when kids are most regulated helps us plan transitions, tasks, and supports more effectively.



Cues improve predictability and follow-through
Visuals, routines, and reminders help clarify what's expected and reduce uncertainty or resistance.



Adults often shift expectations too quickly
When grown-ups change routines or rules, kids may not adapt fast — clear communication is critical.

Prompts Are Supports, Not Cheating



Prompts help children succeed while learning
They provide scaffolding to guide children
through new or challenging tasks, reducing
frustration.



Types of prompts: visual, verbal, gestural, modeled
Examples include picture schedules, pointing,
showing how to do something, or offering verbal
reminders.



Prompts should fade gradually
Over time, reduce support to encourage
independence and mastery of the skill.



Think: training wheels, not crutches
Prompts are temporary tools designed to build
confidence, not long-term dependencies.

Why Modeling Matters



Children learn by observing others
Kids absorb behaviors from adults, siblings, and peers — what they see shapes what they do.



Modeling is more powerful than explaining
Showing calm, respectful, and problem-solving behavior teaches more effectively than verbal instructions alone.



Key skills to model: emotional regulation,
help-seeking, resilience
Demonstrating how to stay calm, ask for help, or recover from mistakes sets the standard for behavior.



Modeling should be intentional and consistent
Consistent adult behavior across situations reinforces expectations and builds trust.

Small Steps = Big Progress (Shaping)

- **Shaping reinforces gradual improvement:** We don't wait for perfection — we reward small steps toward the desired behavior to build momentum.
- **Start with what the child can do:** Begin with a manageable task, then slowly increase expectations as success builds.
- **Reinforce effort and progress:** Praise attempts, even imperfect ones — effort leads to mastery over time.
- **Example: Homework endurance:** 2 minutes of work → praise; then 4 → more praise; then 6 → reward. Each step builds confidence.



Photo by Alexander Dummer on Unsplash

Teaching Routines Step-by-Step



Big routines can overwhelm children

Tasks like getting ready, doing homework, or going to bed involve multiple steps that can feel unmanageable.



Break routines into clear steps

Segment the process into simple, teachable actions — brushing teeth, putting on shoes, packing bag, etc.



Teach one step at a time

Introduce and reinforce each step individually before expecting fluency across the entire routine.



Reinforce each successful step

Use praise, tokens, or attention to celebrate progress through the routine — not just the final result.

What This Looks Like at Home

- **Catch kids being good:** Notice and praise positive behavior the moment it happens to encourage more of it.
- **Reward effort, not perfection:** Focus on the process — trying hard, asking for help, or staying calm — not just outcomes.
- **Use visuals and routines:** Visual schedules, chore charts, and consistent routines help children know what to expect and reduce anxiety.
- **Offer choices and reduce power struggles:** Letting kids choose between acceptable options gives them a sense of control and cooperation.
- **Teach, don't just correct:** Replacing misbehavior with teachable moments helps build skills over time.

What This Looks Like at School

- **Set clear, consistent expectations:** Post rules visually and explain them regularly — predictability reduces anxiety and improves compliance.
- **Respond to behavior consistently:** Use a calm, structured approach to reinforcement and redirection so students know what to expect.
- **Reinforcement over punishment:** Acknowledge effort and improvements more often than correcting missteps to promote a positive climate.
- **Use routines to create stability:** Daily structure supports emotional regulation, especially for students with anxiety or learning differences.
- **Focus on skill-building, not just consequences:** Teach coping, communication, and problem-solving skills as part of behavior support — not just discipline.

Final Takeaway

- **Behavior change starts with safety:** Kids thrive when they feel emotionally safe, understood, and free from fear of harsh punishment.
- **Clarity makes success possible:** When expectations are predictable and consistently reinforced, kids know how to meet them.
- **Effort must be recognized:** Notice and reinforce progress — not just outcomes — to encourage perseverance and resilience.
- **Consistency builds trust and change:** When adults respond with stability and follow through, kids learn to rely on guidance and adapt behavior.
- **Capability, not control, is the goal:** The best behavior outcomes emerge when kids feel capable, empowered, and supported — not coerced.