

# D is for **Discipline**

## The Power of Positive Discipline

Young children need guidance to learn which behaviors are appropriate or desired in certain activities, times, or places and which are not. For example, it might be appropriate to run on the playground when playing with friends, but it is not safe to run in the grocery store or a preschool classroom.

The word “discipline” comes from Latin, meaning to teach or guide. Discipline is often confused with the use of punishment to deal with challenging behavior, but there are positive discipline strategies for reducing challenging behavior and building desired behavior.

What are positive discipline strategies that can be used to prevent challenging behavior and help young children learn when certain behaviors are expected and appropriate and when they are not? When challenging behavior occurs, what positive discipline strategies can you use?

## Strategies to Prevent Challenging Behavior

Use the **3 positive discipline strategies** below to prevent challenging behavior and as a foundation for addressing challenging behavior when it occurs.

### **1. Decide what behaviors are expected or appropriate.**

Parents, other caregivers, and practitioners need to decide what behaviors are appropriate or desired in certain activities, times, or places and help young children learn about which behaviors are appropriate or desired during these certain times and situations. Behavior expectations are based on family, school, and community values.

### **2. Describe and demonstrate expected or appropriate behaviors.**

Once expected behaviors are identified, clearly tell children the expectations by saying or showing them what they should do rather than what they should not do. Whenever possible, describe or demonstrate expectations during and in advance of situations.

### **3. Descriptively praise, provide positive attention, or provide positive reinforcement.**

Young children need to know which of the many behaviors they are doing in a situation are the expected or appropriate ones. When children do an expected or appropriate behavior, provide descriptive praise, positive attention, or positive reinforcement like giving access to a preferred toy, food, or activity. Be immediate, positive, and consistent. This increases the likelihood children will do these behaviors again in the future in similar situations.

# Strategies for Responding to Challenging Behavior

Young children sometimes engage in challenging behavior because they are still learning which behaviors are expected or appropriate and which behaviors are not. Here are **3 positive discipline strategies** for responding to challenging behavior when it occurs.

**1. Remind children what to do.** Young children might not always remember behavior expectations, even for things they do often. When children's behavior is not consistent with expectations in certain situations, use a calm voice to remind them what to do rather than what not to do. This helps them learn what to do so they will be more likely to do the expected behavior next time.

**2. Redirect.** When challenging behavior occurs, try directing children's attention away from the challenging behavior to a more appropriate behavior. This can be a direction that tells them what to do within the activity. It might also be changing the activity or task or providing a choice about what to do.

**3. Ignore challenging behavior.** It is best to ignore challenging behavior if children are safe. When possible, wait until the challenging behavior is not happening and then give descriptive praise, positive attention, or positive reinforcement when you see positive behavior. This helps children learn they will gain your attention or get things they want when they are using appropriate behaviors. Give positives for small steps towards expected or appropriate behaviors.

## What to do When Challenging Behavior Continues and Interferes Significantly With Daily Life

When challenging behavior continues to occur even when the positive discipline strategies described above are used consistently, it may be appropriate to use negative consequences to decrease the challenging behavior. Using negative consequence strategies (what some call punishment) to respond to challenging behavior is often equated to discipline, but these are not good strategies for helping children **learn** positive behavior. Negative consequences do not teach expected or appropriate behaviors and are often associated with side effects of emotional upset and attempts to avoid or escape the situation or the person who is giving the negative consequences.

**1. State a logical negative consequence for a challenging behavior and follow through with the stated consequence.** A consequence is something that happens immediately after a behavior. When provided consistently, logical negative consequences for challenging behavior help children learn what they will lose or not be able to do as a result of their challenging behavior.

**2. Remove the child from a positive environment or situation.** To use this strategy, move the child into a quiet space for a short time (maybe 1-2 minutes) and ignore the challenging behavior until the child has calmed down. Then allow the child to return to the positive environment or situation only if the challenging behavior has stopped. **This strategy will only be effective if the child does not want to escape or avoid the environment or situation where the challenging behavior is happening.** If the child does want to escape or avoid the environment or situation, removing her or him will actually increase the likelihood that the challenging behavior will occur again in the future in the same environment or situation.

**3. Prevent or reduce behaviors that are dangerous or threaten the safety of your child or others.** Structure the situation so the behavior cannot occur by removing the child from the situation (e.g., take the child into the house if he or she is running into the street), blocking access (e.g., to a hot stove), or adding barriers (e.g., cover the corners of a table with soft padding if a child is jumping or running in the house). Observe and stop dangerous or threatening behavior immediately. When positive behavior occurs, use positive discipline strategies to teach expected replacement behaviors. Children cannot do a dangerous or threatening behavior at the same time they are doing an expected or appropriate behavior.

# Examples of Strategies to Prevent Challenging Behavior

## Descriptively praise, provide positive attention, or provide positive reinforcement.

**Child Behavior:** Child walks in the grocery store.

**Descriptive Praise and Positive Attention:** “I like that you are walking in the grocery store - that’s what we do here.”

**Child Behavior:** Child uses a calm voice to say, “More crackers, please.”

**Descriptive Praise, Positive Attention, and Positive Reinforcement:** Give the child more crackers and say, “Thank you for using words to ask. Here are some more crackers.”

# Examples of Strategies for Responding to Challenging Behavior

## Remind children what to do.

**Challenging Behavior:** Child yells in the store.

**Instead of Saying:** “Stop yelling.”

**Describe and Demonstrate:** Say, “Please use an inside voice,” while lowering your voice and gesturing a quiet sign with your finger in front of your lips.

**Child Behavior:** Child talks in a normal tone.

**Descriptively Praise and Give Positive Attention:** “I like when you talk using an inside voice. I can hear you better.”

**Challenging Behavior:** Child throws a toy car when playing.

**Instead of Saying:** “Don’t throw your car.”

**Describe and Demonstrate:** Say, “Keep your car in your hand or on the floor while you play - like this,” while showing the child how to roll the car on the floor.

**Child Behavior:** Child rolls the car on the floor.

**Descriptively Praise and Give Positive Attention:** “Thank you for rolling your car on the floor. That’s how we play with cars.”

## Redirect.

**Challenging Behavior:** Child is throwing a toy car.

**Redirect by Describing and Demonstrating:** Adult rolls a car on the floor and says, “Look, I’m rolling my car. You can roll yours, too.”

**Child Behavior:** Child rolls the car.

**Descriptively Praise and Give Positive Attention:** “I like that you are rolling your car so nicely - just like me!”

**Challenging Behavior:** Child is coloring on the table.

**Redirect by Describing, Demonstrating, and Providing a Choice:** “We only color on paper. Look - I am coloring on red paper. Do you want to color on a red paper or a blue paper?”

**Child Behavior:** Child says, “I want blue,” and starts coloring on the blue paper.

**Descriptively Praise and Give Positive Attention:** “That’s a good choice! You are coloring a beautiful picture.”

## Ignore challenging behavior.

### At the Grocery Store

**Child Behavior:** Asks for a candy bar.

**Adult Response:** “We can’t have candy because it isn’t healthy for our bodies. You can help me choose what cereal to buy, though.”

**Challenging Behavior:** Child yells, “I want candy!” and sits down on the floor crying.

**Ignore the Challenging Behavior:** Adult walks a few steps away and waits quietly without looking directly at the child.

**Child Behavior:** Child stands up and walks toward the shopping cart.

**Descriptively Praise and Give Positive Attention:** “Thank you for standing up so you can help me finish the shopping. We’re getting cereal next. Do you want to pick what kind?”

### At Preschool

**Challenging Behavior:** During classroom story time at the carpet, Avery gets up from her spot on the carpet and walks away from the group.

**Ignore the Challenging Behavior and Attend to Other Children:** “Quentin, I really like the way you are sitting quietly and listening to my story! Sophia, you are sitting nicely too and looking at the pictures. Give me a high five!”

**Child Behavior:** Avery comes back to her seat.

**Descriptively Praise and Give Positive Attention:** “Avery, thank you for sitting in your spot. That’s what we do during story time. Now you can hear the story and see the pictures.”

**Child Behavior:** Avery continues to sit and look at the book for one page.

**Descriptively Praise and Give Positive Attention:** “Avery, you’re doing such a good job sitting and listening to our story. High five!”



# Examples of What to do When Challenging Behavior Continues and Interferes Significantly With Daily Life

**State a logical negative consequence for a challenging behavior and follow through with the stated consequence.**

**Challenging Behavior:** Child is coloring on the table.

**Redirect by Describing, Demonstrating, and Providing a Choice:** “We only color on paper. Look – I am coloring on red paper. Do you want to color on a red paper or a blue paper?”

**Challenging Behavior:** Child continues to color on the table.

**State Logical Negative Consequence:** “We only color on paper. If you color on the table, we will have to put the crayons away.”

**Challenging Behavior:** Child continues to color on the table.

**Logical Negative Consequence:** “You are still coloring on the table, so we have to put the crayons away. I’ll help you clean them up.”

**[adult helps the child put the crayons in the box and choose something else to do]**

**Challenging Behavior:** Child is crying and yelling because the slide at the playground is broken.

**Redirect by Offering a Choice:** “I know you wanted to play on the slide, but it is broken. Look-- you could play on the swings or the jungle gym. Which do you think would be fun?”

**Challenging Behavior:** Child continues to yell, “No!” and pushes adult.

**State Logical Negative Consequence:** “If you can’t make a choice and play nicely with me, then we will have to leave the playground.”

**Challenging Behavior:** Child continues to yell and pushes adult again.

**Logical Negative Consequence:** “You didn’t make a choice to play outside today. It’s time to leave the playground.”

**[adult helps the child leave the playground]**

## Where to Go for Help

If challenging behavior continues and significantly interferes with daily activities, learning, or the children’s interactions with others, ask for help. There are behavior specialists who can help find out why challenging behavior is continuing and provide additional strategies to address challenging behavior at home or at school. You can search a registry of specialists at <https://www.bacb.com/services/o.php?page=100155>. You can also ask a pediatrician or an early education and care provider what resources are available to help address challenging behaviors that are persistent and intense.

## What We Are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center is helping families and practitioners learn to use positive behavior supports and positive discipline strategies.

Visit our website to access more information or resources and learn more about what we are doing.