



Positive Guidance Through the Ages

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By: Tracy Galuski, PhD

“Your kids are so well-behaved, you are lucky. I can barely get out of the house some days.”

We’ve all been there - the crawling baby who empties the kitchen cupboards, the toddler who screams his way through the grocery store or the preschooler who refuses to get dressed in the morning. There are many different ways to react to these situations and when we find ourselves frustrated or reacting in ways that are too punitive or not effective try reframing from the perspective of positive guidance.

What is positive guidance?

It is when we look at each situation through the lens of child development and guiding children’s behavior. By reframing the situation we can move beyond a reaction and towards a more effective response. Punishment, which is punitive and harsh and doesn't consider children's developmental needs, is replaced with responses which teach children how to modify and control their own behavior as they grow and mature. Rather than expecting an immediate change in your child's behavior, think about behavior as a developmental process that takes time to master. Let’s consider how positive guidance might look as children grow and learn over time.

Older Infant

“Every time I turn around she is in a kitchen cupboard! It’s so frustrating!”

Respond by giving infants opportunities to explore in a safe environment: Instead of locking up all of the kitchen cupboards with safety locks, open one and encourage her to explore it. Fill it with plastic storage containers, sealed packages of pasta that rattle when

shaken or mixing bowls and spoons. She will quickly grow out of the “dump and fill” stage. Reframe the situation so that it works for both of you.

Toddler

“He makes me so angry! No matter how much I complain, he splashes in the sink every time he is in the bathroom. Why can’t he just listen?”

Respond by setting limits: As a family, set very clear limits for behaviors that are important to you and reinforce them consistently. Perhaps no drinks are allowed in the living room or no one jumps off the couch. The specific rules don’t matter, just determine what they are and stick to them.

Respond with redirection: This technique is especially effective with toddlers because it channels their energy into something positive. Instead of just saying, "Don't splash!" You could say, 'Lets find a better place for you to play with the water.'" Set aside some dishes for him to wash. Fill up the sink with bubbles, lay out a few towels and put him to work. Sure, it may take longer to complete your chores, but won't it be fun to have a helper? The child who keeps jumping off the couch might need a special place where jumping is allowed.

Preschooler

“My daughter argues about getting dressed every day. I used to pick out an outfit and help her put it on, now she wants to pick out her own clothes and nothing every matches...”

Your child will gain confidence in making her own decisions within an appropriate framework.

Respond by offering choices: Hold up two pieces of clothing and ask her to select one. It may take some practice, but by offering choices she will learn to select one and follow through.

Respond with logical consequences: Within reason let your child feel the natural consequences of her actions. This technique allows children the freedom they need and also allows children to learn from the unintentional consequences of their choices. For example, the child that insists on wearing a pair of pants that are still too large may spend the morning pulling them up.

Think of other choices you might offer. Encourage her to select which vegetable to prepare for dinner, or which chore to complete before she watches television. Focus on what's important and let go of the things that aren't, such as whether or not the pink pants match the rainbow sweater.

None of these techniques will magically transform your children, but if you treat behavior as a developmental process you may find that a combination of techniques, when consistently applied, will be helpful. Be positive as you guide them to appropriate behaviors. Keep it light. One day you may remember with a smile the day your daughter wore that silly outfit to the zoo.

References: Gestwicki, C. (2014). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Curriculum and development in early education* (5th ed.). Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

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Age: *Infant/Toddler, Kindergarten, Preschool*

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