

Parent Resource Guide for Supporting Challenging Behavior in Preschool-Aged Children

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More information and resources visit:

<https://www.everettsd.org/loe-byorlang>





Lens Change

The first principle that can radically change everything when it comes to parenting when faced with needing to support a child with challenging behavior is to change the lens or perspective with which you are viewing and understanding your child's behavior. If you start by giving your child the benefit of the doubt and assume that **they will do well when they can**, it will set you up to search and uncover the reason why the child is having the behavior. There are many reasons children 'misbehave' or have challenging behavior and it's not to act maliciously. More likely, the child...

- is having a difficult time dealing with the demands and stimuli (both internal and external) of their world
- has underdeveloped skills to stop their impulses
- is communicating a need such as safety or connection
- is engaging in a developmentally appropriate behavior that is inconvenient for the adult
- does not have the developmental capability to meet the adult expectation consistently or in that context

Just as only a small tip of an enormous iceberg is visible, lying beneath the surface there can be many complex, compounding factors contributing to the challenging behaviors of young children that they mostly cannot control.



My child is not *giving* me a hard time.
My child is *having* a hard time

Avoid Punishments

There are decades of robust research on the negative outcomes of parents using punishment in their child discipline methods. Most widely researched and strongly validated is the case against corporal punishment, but also any form of punishment including psychological control methods such as isolation, degradation, shaming, withdrawal of affection and removal of or denying access to daily needs also produce similar outcomes. The outcomes seen in research literature is that children who are punished are more much more likely to:

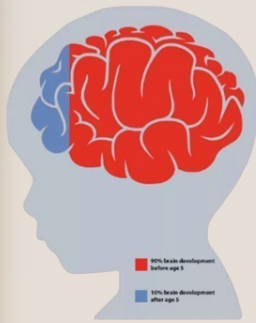
- have more aggressive, externalizing behavior
- have more difficulty with emotional regulation
- have social-emotional delays especially with conflict resolution
- suffer from depression and anxiety in adolescence and adulthood

Of specific importance to the parenting topic is that punishment uses **fear** and breeds **mistrust** in the relationship. Instead of teaching the child a skill or desirable behavior, the child often learns to **sneak** and **lie** to avoid getting caught. This worsens the relationship and often makes the parent increase punishments, keeping the cycle going and fracturing the parent-child relationship even more.

References

- Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>
- Paul, E., & Eckenrode, J. (2015b). Childhood psychological maltreatment subtypes and adolescent depressive symptoms. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 47, 38–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.05.018>

Brain Development



Preschool children are experiencing a very rapid growth of their brain structure insomuch that by age five, 90% of the development has been reached. Additionally, the last area for development which *only begins to manifest in the preschool years* is the prefrontal cortex wherein executive functioning skills such as **impulse control**, **emotional regulation**, organization, **mental flexibility**, working memory and more take shape.

Cognitively, preschoolers are still only able to conceptualize things that are **concrete** and relevant to their immediate experience. They have difficulty changing perspectives or understanding abstract concepts such as time. Additionally, the growth of brain cells is intrinsically tied to physical movement and motor development. Small children are driven to move much more than adults as they need it for development.

That means the activity of billions of neurons and synapses constantly being created can easily overwhelm the young child who does not have conceptual understanding, capacity or skills to handle certain challenges and may understandably result in tantrums and other challenging behaviors.

Making sure to temper your expectations so that you are not requiring your child to resist impulses or control their emotions beyond their neurobiological ability to do so will set you and your child up for success and less frustration.

Biological, Sensory Needs

The behaviors children engage in often are a result of what is happening in their body as there is a connection between the body and the brain that drive our actions. We have many senses giving information to our body and brain all the time including sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste, proprioception (your body awareness coming from receptors in muscles, joints and ligaments), vestibular sense (sense of balance from the inner ear), and interoception (perception of internal signals like heart rate, hunger, pain, digestion, etc.). Some people are very sensitive to input to these systems and it can be overwhelming or even painful while others don't get enough and will be biologically driven to seek more satiate their bodies' needs.

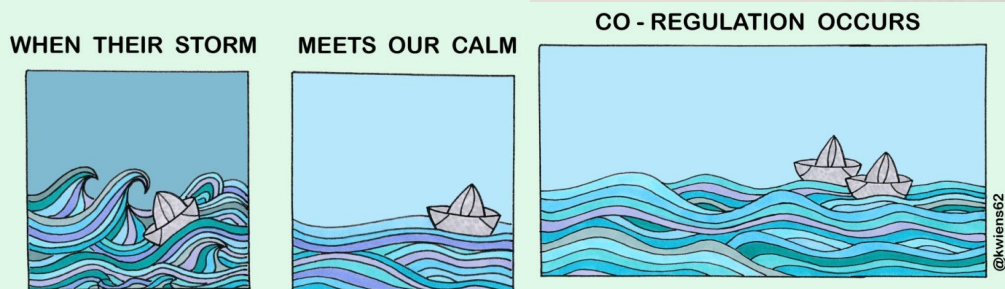
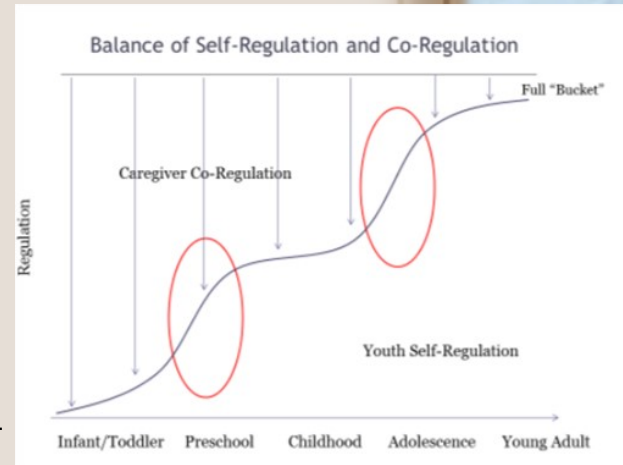
Your body's state at any given moment in terms of rest, hunger, sensory needs, human connection, etc. will affect your ability to handle demands of daily life. This is referred to as your "window of tolerance" by Dr. Dan Siegel. When faced with a demand outside of your window, your nervous system either sends you into a state of fight or flight (hyperarousal) or freeze and shutdown (hypoarousal). That is when you will see those challenging behaviors from children.

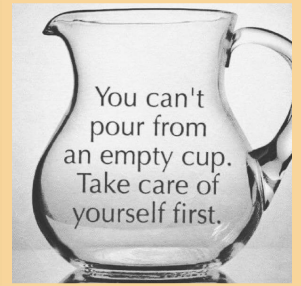
The goal is to help children return to their window of tolerance by regulating their nervous system. They can only learn new skills and behaviors when in a calm state. Then they can learn alternative behaviors to meet their needs as well as learn coping skills and self-care to help them enlarge their window of tolerance. Parents and teachers can also learn how to meet the physical needs of the children so they stay in their optimal zone more consistently.

Co-Regulation

Young children are not yet developmentally ready regulate their emotions and nervous system on their own. They rely on the support of trusted adults with sturdy, optimal-state nervous system to help them return to calm. Just like new-born infants need rocking and soothing to fall asleep or when startled, preschool children still have an immature nervous system and underdeveloped regulatory mechanisms. They develop these systems and skills through consistent, responsive care with trusted adults in their moments of distress called co-regulation. As seen in the graph, the shift from dependence on co-regulation to self-regulation happens gradually throughout life, with two periods of rapid growth happening in the preschool and adolescent years. That means along with providing the co-regulation as needed in difficult moments, your preschool child also will benefit greatly from both watching you model strategies that you use for yourself and receiving direct instruction to learn about their emotions (when they are regulated).

In order to co-regulate with your child, you must be able to first regulate your own emotions and keep your composure to stay connected and present with your child. Try to limit your words but validate their feelings. Admonitions and consequences should wait for another time. Each child is different, so adapt to their needs.





Adult Needs

In order to meet your child's needs and effectively co-regulate with them, you must first focus on yourself. If your body budget is depleted and your physical, emotional or mental needs are suffering, your own window of tolerance will diminish, you will likely get triggered and you will not respond to your child's behavior in a supportive manner. Therefore, it is essential that as a parent, you take good care of yourself in order to take good care of your child, especially when trying to support a child with challenging behavior.

1. Meet your own needs first (get adequate rest, nutrition, connection, movement, security, resources, etc.)
2. Regulate your own emotions—Find strategies that work for you.
3. Know your own triggers. Certain behavior can be especially triggering for us as adults and it is helpful to proactively identify, analyze and make a plan for how to deal with those difficult behaviors
4. Find a network of support. Modern parenting especially in western cultures is very difficult because it can be isolating. If you don't have family or group of friends to share the burden of responsibility, look around in the community or online and start building one.
5. Practice self compassion. It is impossible to be a perfect parent. Everyone makes mistakes and actually, the strength of relationships comes from the repair after a rupture. Your child will learn from your example of trying again and giving yourself grace as you do for them.



Expectations and Boundaries

It is important that children are given clear expectations, boundaries and a sturdy, confident leader to feel safe. Start with the expectation and state it as simply as possible in positive terms. Using the negative term tends to make us focus on the words spoken and not the implication. For example, if you are told to not think about a pink elephant, what image comes to your mind? The one you were told not to think about? Similarly, expectations such as “walk quietly” work better than “*don’t* run and scream!”

It will be necessary to give boundaries, as well. Dr. Becky Kennedy says that a boundary is something that the parent does and requires nothing on the child’s part. It is when you step in with confidence to take action to interrupt a behavior or change the environment. This should be done calmly and with empathy, by validating the child’s feelings or simply saying, “I can’t let you...”

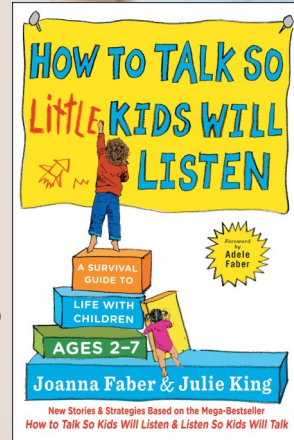
Changing an environment is always better and more effective than changing a behavior, so it is the first place to start. Remember, young children don’t have the refined executive function skills such as impulse control to stop or change behavior and may need parents to compassionately step in to hold boundaries for them and changing the environment may help it be more manageable.

Scan or click the QR code to hear Dr. Becky give more examples about boundaries and the importance of a sturdy leader in this video clip. Other great parenting educators that speak on this and other topics on social media include Mr. Chazz, Janet Lansbury, Marcela Collier, Destini Ann.



Keys to Cooperation: Relationships and Play

Children are much more likely to cooperate and engage in the desired behaviors that parents and teachers ask of them when they have built strong relationships and feel connected to them. Every parent does special things to build loving relationships with their child, but there are a few suggestions to help amplify these efforts. Some are found in the book *How To Talk So Little Kids Will Listen* by Joanna Faber and Julie King. The first and most important is listening attentively and validating your child's feelings to help them feel understood and supported.



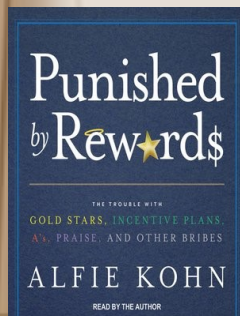
Secondly, the fastest way to a child's heart is through play. Of the many ways to do this, Faber and King give ideas such as 'give your child their wish in a fantasy when you can't give it to them in reality.' or 'make an ordinary object talk' or 'make a task into a game'. Being silly and playful is a powerful, effective way to engage children to cooperate in transitions or difficult tasks. It is so much better than common strategies such saying goodbye and pretending to walk away, which only promotes compliance out of fear of abandonment and sends the child into a dysregulated state.

Conscious Discipline promotes the practice of "I Love You Rituals" which are daily moments when the caregiver and child engage in a ritual of a song or rhyme and include the following elements: eye contact, physical touch, presence and playfulness.

There is a highly recommended social media account and website called Playful Heart Parenting with endless examples of how to integrate playful moments into the day with your child.

Collaborative and Proactive Solutions

When addressing problems with your child, consider changing the nature of your parental relationship from a power-over dynamic to a collaborative one, working together with your child to find solutions. This would include avoiding the use of rewards and external manipulations to produce the behavior you want your child to have. Instead, team up to be detectives to find the root of the problem and create a plan that will work for everyone to be happy. Dr. Ross Greene and his team have refined this to a process called Collaborative and Proactive Solutions and have a website with many resources to help parents to learn these skills and is found at livesinthebalance.org. There is a dedicated section of the website to applying the principles with very young children, including an hour long film and video examples of solving problems with preschoolers. Find this section at: <https://livesinthebalance.org/cps-with-young-kids/>



Scholar and author Alfie Kohn presents research in his books *Punished by Rewards* and *Unconditional Parenting* that using rewards and praise can have the opposite of the intended effect in the long term. So, it may be easy to get obedience from a child in the immediate moment by promising a treat or privilege for the behavior you want them to have, but it will be much more meaningful and helpful to understand what skills they need to develop and what concerns are keeping them from meeting your expectations.

Special Considerations

Human behavior is very complicated and although the information and suggestions given in this pamphlet are relevant and reliable for almost everyone, there are certain populations that should be given special consideration.

Specifically, children who are diagnosed with autism and *also* have a PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) profile may have a nervous system that is sensitized to threat when they perceive a loss of autonomy. It may be much more difficult to understand their behavior and the approach to support them may be very different than for other children. There are increasingly more professionals and researchers who are discussing the topic of PDA and giving direct support to parents. Two insightful accounts to learn more information and effective approach for parenting PDA kids include: At Peace Parents with Casey Ehrlich www.atpeaceparents.com and the book *Low Demand Parenting* by Amanda Diekman.

Secondly, children who have experienced acute or prolonged trauma, especially early in life, have had a disruption to the organization of their brain and may have behaviors that are different or more severe than other children. Additionally, they may respond to behavioral support differently than other children and require much more consistent and intensive interventions. Certainly, a child with such history along with their family and school team should count on the continued guidance and support of qualified mental health professionals who specialize in trauma.