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PARENTING GUIDELINES FOR FOSTERING HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT IN YOUR PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

*Parents have their pre-school child “all to themselves.” Both the 2 years old “toddler” and the six years old, excited and enthusiastic “kindergarten big boy or big girl,” have their emotional and psychological eyes on their parents most of the time. They usually are very loving towards and attached to their parents. This preschool time at home is the stage of life for parents to go beyond changing diapers and developing good hygiene habits. **During the preschool years, parents should really focus intently on the psychological and emotional development of their child.***

During this time parents should focus on the following positive key components:

- 1. The parent is the primary focus for this group of children.**

Consequently, the parent’s love, attention, and affirmation are the primary incentive for these children. Parents should give their children lots of validation and praise for positive behavior. Praise is always welcome, but is most valuable when it is concrete. (*“I really appreciate your helping mommy carry the groceries. You are becoming so very helpful.”*) **Criticism and negative remarks are neither welcome nor useful.** A positive response for new, developmentally desired behaviors is always welcome, but excessive praise, delivered just to “flatter the child and make the child feel special,” is not so useful. It promotes overinflated ego development rather than solid psychological self-esteem.

2. **Parents should seek to identify behaviors which are positive and which represent growth of positive qualities and characteristics.** They should then convert these observations into concrete, positive feedback. (*“Thank you so much for helping me pick up the toys. You are being so helpful.”; “When you sit nicely at dinner, it makes me feel so good. You are really getting bigger.”; “I see you are really cooperating well today. You are learning to cooperate so well, sweetheart.”*).
3. Parents should engage in as much **“positive affirmation”** as possible with their child. Parents should express pleasure when their child does or learns something novel or new. Parents should also express pleasure when their child exhibits a quality or virtue which they value. **Qualities like patience, perseverance and effort are rewarded.** The way a parent expresses pleasure and rewards the child is simply to quietly **“notice out loud”** what the child is doing and how they are doing it. (*“I notice you inventing something really new with those Legos. How interesting!”; “I am amazed at how patient you are with those blocks that keep toppling down.”*).
4. **Parents should avoid criticism and negative feedback.** Generalized negative labeling statements like “You’re being mean,” or “Don’t be so naughty,” are discouraged. Rather, **parents should convert the negative behavior into the positive, desired behavior, and tell the child that they would like more of the positive behavior.** (*“I’m not happy with the way you asked me for a glass of milk. Please ask me again in your kind voice,”*) is much preferred over “Don’t be rude.”
5. **Parents should avoid blaming.** If the parent makes a judgment that it is important to let their child know that a certain behavior is not desired, **the parent should use an “I” message rather than a “You” message with their child.** Instead of “You make me so angry. You’re upsetting me. You’re

behaving badly,” the parent should take the time to frame the same messages in “I” terms, using an “I message.” (*“When you scream at me at the top of your lungs, I get upset. And when you don’t listen to my requests that you stop yelling, I get angry. I don’t want to feel that way. But I would be fine if you got angry and told me without all of the yelling.”*) **The format for “I” messages is** **“When you... (mention specific, concrete behavior) ... I feel...(mention your emotion). And I prefer you would do (mention specific, desired positive behavior) ... instead.”**

What to do with your pre-school aged child’s aggressive negativity:

Although the focus of this article is using positive feedback from the parent to foster healthy development in the preschool child, parents nonetheless often report that they are befuddled about what to do when their child “completely melts down, tantrums, hits, throws things and screams.” I have written an article on helping your child with dysregulated anger and another on how to foster emotional regulation in your child. Those articles might be very helpful with the “tantrum” problem. For now, let me introduce one possible technique – a specific way to apply the general concept of “timeouts.”

- 1. When your child is actively aggressing against you or against a sibling, timeouts may be used in a very specific way:**
- 2. First, a warning is issued** when a child becomes aggressive: (*“You are allowed to be angry, but you may not hit mommy or scream at mommy at the top of your lungs. This is a warning. I very much want you to tell me about your angry feelings without hitting me or screaming at me.”*).

- 3. If the child persists in the aggressive behavior, they are given a one-minute time out in a designated spot.** That spot usually is in the **same room as the parent for the preschool child.** If the child continues to carry on verbally, but not physically, the verbal noise is simply ignored. However, **the child is informed in a very matter of fact tone, that the one-minute timer cannot start until the parent hears “quiet.”** It is best to use an actual timer on your cell phone or kitchen timer that rings at the end of the one minute. Children need to see that you mean what you say.
- 4. If the child refuses to stay in the preordained, habitual time out location, the parent physically guides the child to their room for a length of time which equals their age.** If the **child refuses** to be guided, the parent **carries the child** to the room. If the child is getting too big, too strong or becoming too violent to use physical carrying or guiding as a method, the parent simply states: “I know you are capable of going to your room on your own. I will walk you to your room if you like. However, **until you get to your room and stay there for four minutes, I will run my timer.** And **the consequence I give you for not going to your room will get bigger depending on how many minutes build up on the timer before you get to your room.**”
- 5. The length of the timeout consequence builds very slowly so the child has plenty of time and incentive to get control of themselves.**
- 6. Finally, at whatever point the child consents to comply, they are quietly, in a matter-of-fact voice, thanked for “cooperating.”**

Parents of preschool children should seek to surround their child with positive feedback and support for positive behaviors and positive

learnings, especially teaching your child how to live and act in a manner which is consistent with what you most value. When the parent needs to use punishment, it should always be done gently and firmly. The positive parent uses punishment educatively, with the goal of teaching the child about living in ways that will help them learn from mistakes and help them make their life work better. They do not seek to make their child suffer guilt or shame.

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