

Behaviour in Children with Language Disorders-A Handout for Parents



Dara Shore, MCIsc, Langley, BC

Children who act up when things don't go their way are often labeled as spoiled, stubborn or manipulative. However, these labels suggest that their behaviour is intentional, with hidden reasons.

Many children with behaviour problems also have communication disorders. Children with expressive language disorders often use inappropriate actions to get attention or escape a situation. Difficulty with expression can also prevent the child from asking questions to clarify what he does not understand.

Research has shown that punishing children works only in the short term. Effective behaviour modification tends to rely instead on strategies for preventing behaviour problems.

Points or tokens are particularly useful. Give points or tokens when the child performs the desired behaviour. Tokens or points are traded later for rewards. Use natural consequences as much as possible in rewards, and be willing to negotiate rewards if he finds something else more motivating. Tokens can be gradually faded out until the child feels rewarded by positive verbal feedback.

Discourage inappropriate behaviour with an effective negative consequence (e.g., time out or privilege lost). A time out takes away your attention, which is often the reason for the inappropriate behaviour in the first place. Be careful not to reward inappropriate behaviour (e.g., buying a candy bar to make him stop screaming).

Rules should be stated simply and clearly to ensure the child's understanding. You should also provide a rationale for your rules. ("When you do X, I am worried that you hurt yourself.")

Explaining the agenda for the day lets the child know that activities and expectations will be changing, and that his behaviour may be required to adapt accordingly. If he knows in advance that expectations will be changing, he will be less confused later on when the changes occur, and therefore less likely to act out.

State the child's name to get his attention. Describe explicitly the desired behaviour you expect. Speak slowly. Use "I" or "We" messages, as they are less confrontational (e.g., "I need you to sit." vs. "You have to sit down.") Use "need" vs. "want," as this gives the child less of an option and avoids a power struggle.

If a child acts out while you are speaking, determine if he is intentionally argumentative, or if it is inappropriate use of language. If it is inappropriate language use, give him the words that you believe he needs. For example, if he says "No! I don't want to!" when you ask him to eat the rest of his meal, you can say, "Oh, you are full. You don't want to eat any more."

Look for signs that he does not understand. He may look confused, look away from you, or stop paying attention to what you are saying. Ask him if he understands. If he says he understands, ask him to repeat back in his own words. If he does not understand, rephrase in simpler words. If he still does not understand, have him tell you what part of the sentence is not clear. If you said, "I went to the store yesterday," he could specify what he did not understand by saying, "Who went to the store?" or "You went where?"


Establish routines. Signal the start of routines by the same set of cues each time. For example, clearing the dinner table can be cued by saying, "Time to clean up." Cues will let the child know that one event, such as dinner, is over, and another is beginning, and that he must behave accordingly in the new situation. Since expectations for the behaviour in the new event have been previously explained to him, he will already understand the expectations of the new event. Keep routines consistent so that the child learns to use the same set of actions each time.

Remain calm and in control, even though you might not feel this way. Be aware of your tone, volume, and rate. If your child thinks you are angry with him, he will likely act defensively, and act out even more. Don't take the child's unruly behaviour personally. It is important to have emotional detachment, because this will provide the opportunity for clear thinking.

Know your child's signs of oncoming behaviour problems. Children often project their feelings on to play objects. A child may say his bunny is tired to show you that he is. Some children will exhibit an increased rate of agitation and anxiety, or withdrawal from the situation.

Research has shown that undesirable behaviours are dramatically reduced when a child receives intervention for communication difficulties. Treatment for language comprehension can improve what the child understands, which will help him follow directions and requests. Treatment for expressive language will improve the child's ability to express his ideas, wants, and needs verbally, so that he does not have to use physical aggression to express himself. Treatment for social skill development will teach the child new socially desirable ways to express himself.

Intervention for behaviour problems and for communication disorders is most effective early in life. Devoting resources to prevention reduces the need for expensive and extensive treatment later.

<p>Written by <i>Dara Shore, MClSc, Langley, BC</i> for the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists.</p>		<p>Posted by the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, October 2000.</p>
--	---	---