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Reinforcement for Appropriate Behavior

The best way to teach a child correct behavior is by giving reinforcement for the behaviors the adult wants to encourage, rather than by calling too much attention to negative behaviors. Rewarding and reinforcing appropriate behavior is the best way to teach a child how to act in the world. By concentrating on appropriate behaviors rather than inappropriate ones, parents and caregivers can guide the child toward correct behavior and foster positive self-esteem.

Tips for Reinforcing Appropriate Behavior

- Be quick to notice behaviors you want to see repeated. A small child's memory is short, so it is important to hear positive comments right away. Constant negative reinforcement does not teach a child what he or she CAN or SHOULD do.
- Avoid overusing "no," "don't," "stop it," "behave yourself," etc.
- Replace these with a positive statement that tells a child what is acceptable. "You need to shut the door quietly."
- Do not take appropriate behavior for granted. Praising appropriate behavior frequently may lessen a child's desire to gain attention with unacceptable behavior.

- Be specific about the behaviors you appreciate. Instead of saying "That's a good girl," say "Thank you for sharing that with your sister" or "I like the way you picked up your toys."
- Praise the behavior, not just the individual. Instead of saying "You are a big boy," say "It really helps me when you set the table." Some undesirable behaviors can be ignored, but not if they endanger someone's health, safety or property. In other words, don't sweat the small stuff. You don't need to correct every tiny mistake a child makes. Sometimes ignoring or walking away from these behaviors is more effective than calling attention to them.
- Power struggles create a "win/lose" conflict in which one individual is determined to win, forcing the other person to lose. Avoid power struggles if possible by distracting a young child or by giving a choice. Avoid turning unimportant issues into power struggles. If the child picks out a shirt that does not match his pants, it would not be an issue important enough to argue over.
- Avoid reminding a child of past misbehavior. This can cause resentment and call undue attention to the inappropriate behavior, reinforcing it. Hearing someone say "You always leave your room in a mess" is not very motivating to change behavior. Deal with the "here and now."

Develop a strong emotional connection with your child by praising, encouraging, hugging and cuddling, smiling, and showing enthusiasm for what he or she accomplishes.

For more information, contact the Family Life Educators at 605-322-3660 or familylifeeducators@avera.org.

15-AMCK-0778 REV040319