

# Tips and Reminders for Guiding Behavior

**Provide Structure.** Set up the space (i.e., classroom, multi-purpose room, or yard) to match the needs and energy level of the activity.

**Stay grounded.** Start an activity from a point of order. Depending on the activity help kids prepare and be ready to focus on the activity.

**Give children clear expectations.** Let students know which behaviors are expected and acceptable in different situations.

**Provide cues.** Give gentle yet firm reminders of the rules. Notice when someone is not on task/target. Respond to signs of anxiety and agitation before they escalate. Sometimes a look or a visual cue is all that is needed.

**Reinforce positive behaviors.** Acknowledging good behavior is specific and often allows the child to put two and two together. For example, “that was a nice way to let me know you didn’t like snack.” Generic praise does little to inform children what they did well. Use praise sparingly and specific to the child. If used too often praise becomes meaningless. Focus on reinforcing things that encourage skill building like: “I saw how hard you worked on that. You were really focused.” Even when there are challenges, appropriate positive reinforcement helps. “I can see you are thinking hard right now. I like that you are spending that time to pause and think about your choice.”

**Ignore negative behaviors.** When appropriate (no possible danger); ignore a behavior or give kids time to see if they can redirect without intervention.

**Touch when and how appropriate.** This tip is child dependent. For some children a gentle touch on the shoulder can be calming, for others it can escalate the situation.

**Build rituals.** For regular routines and transitions, create rituals, i.e., a chant, game, question, movement, etc. You may wish to plan something to do regularly whenever the group is getting out of hand.

**Use individual or group problem solving.** Problem solving skills are an essential part of guiding behavior. At times this may involve the whole group – at other times it is individual. Discuss the issue and who is involved to determine which strategy to use. Implementing a consistent conflict resolution strategy is helpful as it allows for repetition and encourages all children learn to use it.

**Provide choices.** Kids are different with different interests and needs, Offer children choices for their activities.

**Vary groupings.** Some activities are best done in small groups to provide more individual attention. At other times, whole group activities are best. Mix it up based on the needs of the kids and the needs of the activity.

**Foster leadership.** Let the leadership skills of the group emerge. Some kids can lead games, others lead crafts. Leadership skills develop when kids are given a chance to practice and use them.



**Transform the situation.** When it all seems to be falling apart or a child is stuck in a negative groove, turn it around. Diffuse the tension by changing things up so an issue can be tackled or focus redirected.

**Redirect children who are behaving inappropriately.** When a child or a group's actions are inappropriate or disruptive, redirect or change the activity. For example, when you can feel the tension is getting high in a game, change up the game or change the tempo of the game to diffuse or redirect the energy.

**Help children "Save Face".** Try to create an opportunity for a child to "save face", to correct a wrong, to find a way out, to change a behavior on their own, and to take responsibility for themselves. No one wins when a child feels cornered or embarrassed. Help them recover with dignity and pride intact.

**Use natural and logical consequences.** Natural and logical consequences are proportionate and related to the behavior which allows for better learning and behavior change. It allows a child to learn there are consequences and begin the process of evaluating the consequences of their actions. Avoid punitive consequences.

**Monitor activities.** Circulate throughout the room. Make the rounds. Check on children's progress. Comment on their involvement or progress in a specific activity. Get involved. Redirect wandering children. Ask questions and expand the thinking of children involved in an activity. Head behavior off at the pass—if an activity or an interaction is likely to escalate into something more, be there. Don't wait too long before you respond.

**Send consistent messages.** Make sure your words, mannerisms, and body language are consistent. If it's serious, be serious. If it's funny, make a joke...but don't confuse the two. Avoid sarcasm that sends mixed messages such as "*That was really smart.*"

**Follow through.** Once you set forth an expectation or potential consequence, follow through. Children learn to trust that you mean what you say when you're focused enough to finish what you start.

**Choose your words carefully.** Resist the tendency to talk too much with young children or to lecture older children. Draft some phrases that are brief and to the point when guiding children: "That hurts, sit with me, join the group, walk, look at my eyes, come here, use your walking feet." Avoid those words that can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy: "You always, you never, why can't you, I never expected you to..., etc." Avoid words that attack a child's personality and pass judgment, i.e., "You're lazy, you're stupid, you're a troublemaker, you're bad." Instead, focus on the specific frustrating behavior, i.e., "When you don't participate in clean up, you're not being fair to the rest of the children. It's your mess; you need to clean it up. When you make a decision to break a rule, that's your choice but you will have to face the consequences."

**Don't practice long distance discipline.** Go directly to the child. Avoid standing over a child, get down to their level and establish eye contact. Understand that for some children, although you are at their level, eye contact is not the best approach. It is best not to "demand" they look at you.

**Take away or minimize the audience.** There are times when privacy is needed to best address a behavior situation. By not being in either vision or hearing of other children, a child can be more open and honest in processing of the situation.

**Diffuse power words (i.e., swear words).** Simply say, it sounds like you are experiencing some pretty big feelings and then help them to determine another way to express that feeling. Don't get too caught up in the words themselves.

**Use assertive "I messages".** I want you to...I'm concerned when you...I feel... I expect you to...I know you can handle this differently. Focus on what to do, not what to stop doing. "I need you to stop...." will often trigger a confrontation or denial. The immediate response is for the child to say, "I wasn't doing anything. It isn't my fault."

**Ask yourself "Does it really matter?"** It's normal for children to exert their autonomy and independence by making a lot of requests. Sometimes staff get into the habit of saying "no" more than is necessary. Before you say "no" to a child, ask yourself, "Does it really matter?" If it doesn't, then let the child do as he or she pleases. This helps in giving them power when appropriate and in building that warm and respectful relationship that will make you more effective when you need to guide and discipline. If it really does matter, then it's OK to say no...just make sure you explain your decision to the child. Your explanation is part of the learning process. Don't allow the child to turn no into a yes by arguing or throwing a tantrum.

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