



Healthy Minds Newsletter

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Let's Work Together



Problem Behavior

Now that you are home with your children 24/7, you may be dealing with problem behaviors. A “problem behavior” is any challenging or inappropriate behavior, such as hitting, having a tantrum, or simply refusing to follow directions. Once these behaviors are happening, you may be responding in a way that reinforces those behaviors without realizing it. It’s important to consider why your child is engaging in these behaviors. All behavior, whether it’s appropriate or not, acts as a form of communication. Consider what your child is trying to communicate to you through their problem behavior, and provide them with the appropriate way to communicate their needs. There are 4 common reasons your child is likely engaging in problem behavior.

1. **Attention:** Now more than ever, children want attention all throughout the day. Your child may cry, scream, hit their siblings, or do any range of behaviors to get your attention, especially if you are busy working from home.

What to Do: Make sure that your children know when you are available and when you're not; maybe keep a door open or closed or have some signal for them. Teach them how to ask for attention when your child is not engaging in problem behavior, and reward every appropriate request with lots of attention. If your child is already engaging in problem behavior and you suspect it's to get your attention, make sure **not** to give your child attention until they stop the problem behavior, or until they communicate appropriately.

2. **Escape:** Parents everywhere now have to adjust to being the only ones giving demands to their children. It's hard to gain instructional control for schoolwork when before they had several teachers giving those directions. Your child may engage in a wide range of problem behaviors to attempt to escape these new demands.

What to Do: Take the time to reinforce your child every time they follow through on any direction, no matter how small. Teach how to ask for a break, and make sure to give adequate breaks, especially for tasks that may be more difficult for your child. If your child is already engaging in problem behavior and you suspect it's to escape a demand, remind them they can take a break if they ask appropriately. Do NOT allow your child to escape the demand, and continue presenting the demand until they complete it. If necessary, you can always decrease the amount of work. For example, if you ask your child to pick up toys but they have a 30 minute tantrum, you can reward them for picking up just a few toys.

3. **Tangible:** Now that your children are home, toys and snacks are more easily accessible than they were in school. If you have several children, siblings are likely arguing over toys, games, or other items. This is a very common reason for problem behaviors to arise.

What to Do: Make sure that only the toys, food, or activities that you want available to your children are accessible, and put everything else out of reach. If you have a particular item that you would like to use as a reward for your children, make sure that it is not accessible to them, but only to you! Now that you are home more often, use this as an opportunity to teach your children to ask for things. Teach how to ask appropriately for a turn with a toy or game (see below for tips on turn taking). If you suspect your child is engaging in problem behaviors to get access to something, do NOT give them access to it! Remind them to ask appropriately, or if the item is completely unavailable, provide at least two alternative choices.

4. **Sensory:** We all engage in some type of sensory driven behavior, whether it's biting our nails, twirling our hair or tapping our feet. Children with autism may engage in many more sensory behaviors, such as rocking or hand flapping. Sometimes, these sensory behaviors may present as problem behaviors. Tapping a pencil may not be an issue, but tapping a toy car against the wall repetitively until it leaves a dent may become a problem.

What to Do: If your child is engaging in a sensory behavior, try to find another behavior that your child may prefer more. For example, if your child likes to chew on the tops of pens and pencils, replace this by giving gum to chew on instead. If they like the sound of objects tapping against the walls, replace this with a toy that makes noise, or allow them to bang on a drum instead.



Eliminating Power Struggles

“My Child Isn’t Giving Me a Hard Time, He’s HAVING a Hard time.” - Ross W. Greene

Problem behavior can be incredibly frustrating. However, the fact of the matter is no one ever truly wins in a heated argument between a parent and child...*Or really anyone, but that can be for another day :) Eliminating power struggles does **not** mean we remove demands and necessities, but it **does** mean building connection and understanding around the demands that are placed.*

1. There is a right time for the word “no.”

- Do not ask a question in replacement of giving a demand. Asking the question “Do you want to clean your room?” means your child may come back and say “no.” Try phrasing it so that it is not a question, but a statement. For example; *“you have to clean your room today before going out with your friends.”*

2. Give the reason, and try not to make it “because I said so.”

- Remember, we are looking at behavior as communication. Letting children know the real reason for why chores, or non-preferred activities are necessary is important. “We are going to wash our hands before dinner because otherwise our dirty hands could get us sick.” This way, the motivation behind washing our hands is to avoid getting sick, not getting yelled at... which is really the point, right?

3. Put the attitude/ argument on extinction

- Ignore the attitude, and eventually, as it no longer gets a response, it will decrease. In Applied Behavior Analysis we call this extinction. Let the child get the last word, and don't give that behavior a "pay out." When things cool down, you could always come back and have a conversation with your child about how that "attitude," may make you feel.

4. Model what you want to see.

- In the end, it is the adults who have the control, and it is us who set the example. Practice what you want your child to do, even when it feels really hard!

5. Find a way to release any frustrations

- Power struggles can be *so* frustrating, and it can be hard to model the expected behavior. Disrespect, attitude, and many other interfering behaviors can be very triggering to adults and we so often catch ourselves lashing out. Find a way to release, whether it is journaling, calling a friend to vent, or going for a run will be beneficial to all parties.

Understanding that "attitude," or "disrespect," can be very triggering for adults, and frustrating to say the least... we want to provide some questions that may assist:

- What is underneath the attitude?
- Is there a reason they may be seeking control?
- Are there any changes in their routine?
- Were they potentially expecting their day to go differently? Was their perception different from reality?

Click [here](#) for more info on avoiding power struggles with children.



After the Argument

“ I hate you! You’re the worst mom ever! I wish you would die!” screamed my 16 year old daughter. Man, those words stung! What I wanted to say was “Well you’re a spoiled brat!” (and a few other choice words which are inappropriate right now). But I didn't. Not because I am some saint of a mom, but as an adult, I understand the power of words. Words have the power and energy to encourage and bless or bring destruction and pain. Take a minute and think about the best thing someone has ever told you- how did it make you feel? Loved? Important? Warm inside? Now think about the worst thing someone has said to you- how did you feel? Rejected? Angry? Hurt? How long did those hurtful words stay with you- did you play them over in your mind? As we are quarantined with our children, it’s easy to lose our cool and say things we wish we could take back. When (not if, let’s be honest, we are human) we do, take a moment to apologize and explain to your child that you made a mistake and will try not to do it again. And follow up with words that encourage, nurture and heal.

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Correcting Positively

In young kids, it is **important** to shape expectations and behaviors. Doing so using positive language as opposed to corrective statements is also **important**. It is quick and easy to correct young kids with statements such as “*Stop what you are doing.*” In the end, the corrective statements are also just a “quick fix,” in the moment. We do not want “quick fixes,” when it comes to child behavior, *we want lasting change* that builds their self control, impulsivity, problem solving skills, independence, and more. Instead of using corrective statements, shape them to the positive. “*Please use your inside voice,*” “*Can you find something else to do?*” “*We walk inside the house,*” Etc. Using the positive alternative to corrective statements may feel complicated at first. Why? Because the behaviors that require correction can be REALLY annoying! Some tips to use as motivation:

- **Build independence.** Positive statements increase expected behavior over time. With time, it becomes first nature to provide the positive alternative to corrective statements, and with time, you can even shape it into questions. “*Should you be running or walking right now?*” This way, it gives them the control of WHAT to do, and even allows you to see whether they truly understand the expectation at hand. With corrective statements,

our children are waiting for us to tell them what to do, instead of making the decision on their own.

- **Eliminate struggle.** Many kids KNOW what they are doing is a “button-pusher,” responding positively every time eliminates our frustration serving as reinforcement. I want to be clear when I say that this does NOT mean there is not a place for corrective statements but this strategy may be super helpful in allowing those words to be more powerful when they ARE needed!

YOUR WORDS MATTER

	INSTEAD OF...	TRY
	Be quiet.	Can you use a softer voice?
	What a mess!	It looks like you had fun! How can we clean up?
	Do you need help?	I'm here to help if you need me.
	I explained how to do this yesterday.	Maybe I can show you another way.
	Do I need to separate you?	Could you use a break?
	Stop crying.	It's okay to cry.
	Do you have any questions?	What questions do you have?
	You're OK.	How are you feeling?
	It's not that hard.	You can do hard things.
	We don't talk like that.	Please use kind words. WE ARE TEACHERS



Life Skills

While your kids are home, it's the perfect opportunity to teach them life skills, such as basic household chores or daily living skills. We often teach life skills through task analyses, which involves breaking down the skill into several steps, and teaching each step individually. We have provided two task analyses below for washing dishes and putting clothes away.

Washing Dishes	Hanging Clothes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn on water and regulate to a warm temperature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather clothes to be hung up
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pick up sponge and dish soap and squeeze a dime size amount of soap on sponge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather hangers and make sure you have the correct number of hangers for the number of clothes that need to be hung up
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pick up one dirty dish and rinse it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pick up a hanger and one shirt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrub the dish with the soapy sponge in circular motions until clean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slide one end of the hanger into one side of the neck hole in the shirt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rinse the dish until no soap is left 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using both hands, hold the neck of the shirt open and slide the other end of the hanger into it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put dish on drying rack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hang the shirt on the rod in the closet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat steps until all dishes are cleaned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat these steps for every piece of clothing to be hung up
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rinse hands and turn off water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close the closet when done



Bring it all together: Now that your kids are home more often, don't feel bad about giving them more chores, like doing the dishes! If you do ask your child to wash the dishes and they engage in **problem behavior to escape** the demand, use the strategies listed above and make sure they still wash at least one dish! Remind your child to ask for a break, or for help if necessary, but still follow through with the direction. While doing this, try to avoid getting in a **power struggle**. You can do this by using **positive language**, giving the reason behind your direction, ignoring the problem behavior (not your child!) and modeling what you would like done. Don't forget to provide positive praise!



Social Skills: Taking Turns

Social Skills: Taking turns is a social skill that we use in our day to day routines without really ever noticing it. It is a crucial skill in creating friendships and playing games. Turn taking, however, is not a skill that comes naturally to children, it has to be taught. When teaching your child (or children) to take turns, here are some tips that might help!

- 1. Use a timer:** Some children enjoy seeing the time countdown until it is their turn, some only like to hear when the timer goes off, some don't like it at all. Either way, letting your child know "okay it's your turn with the toy for 2 minutes, then your brother's turn" will set the expectation from the beginning and allow your child to know that their turn isn't going to last forever.
- 2. Keep the language simple:** For children just learning to take turns, making the language familiar and simple is key. "My turn, your turn" is all that needs to be said when taking turns. You can incorporate this language into your days as well, not just when playing games or sharing toys.
- 3. Model it:** As mentioned previously, practice what you want your child to do! If you have older children who know how to take turns, have them help you model what it might look like for your younger child.
- 4. Praise them:** By now you might be sensing a common theme in our "tips," but trust us, this one helps! When you catch your child taking turns nicely, tell them how happy it makes you! "I love how nicely you're waiting for your turn!" "Wow, thank you so much for letting your sister play with that doll!" Your child loves hearing that they're doing good, especially when it's something that might not enjoy (like taking turns!).



Mindful Moment

Gather a few tasty treats and find a comfortable spot to relax. You may want to use napkins as this can get a bit messy. Take turns exploring how each food smells (does it smell like anything else? Does the scent bring a memory to mind?). Then feel the food with your fingers (Is it squishy? Rough? Does it feel like anything else?). Then taste the food slowly (does it taste sweet, sour, salty? Do you like it? Does it taste like any other foods?). Last, take turns sharing what food you want to try next!



Weekly Tips

1. **Take care of yourself.** There is this pressure to be perfect right now. Parents are feeling the stress of handling this crisis, assuming all of their roles, and then educating their children as well. One of the best ways to teach self care, and self advocacy to you children is to model it. Tell them if you're feeling overwhelmed, and then tell them how you are going to unwind. Your self care matters too. Take a walk, take some deep breaths, take a nap, listen to some music... whatever it is that allows you to unwind. It's JUST as important, if not more important than all of the new roles you are playing. - Lauryn Elder M.Ed., BCBA
2. **Do something out of the ordinary!** With our current circumstances, we've all gotten into the same old routine. Schedule a "fun night" where you do something different! Dress up in fancy clothes and host a "ball." Choose a theme like "favorite superheroes" and have everyone dress in costume. It sounds so silly, but it'll break up the same old, same old and it'll give you a great memory. - Alexis Foulk, M.S., BCBA

3. **Don't reinforce problem behavior!** If your child is having a hard time, make sure that you are not reinforcing their inappropriate behaviors. Ignore the behavior, not your child! The best way to react is by giving attention and praise every time your child is doing exactly what you want them to be doing. - Alexandria Larson M.S., BCBA
4. **Tell your child something you like about them and have them tell you what they like about you!** Sit next to each other, or face each other and see who can come up with the most positive things you like about each other! Parents- write these down and tuck them away for the days when your children are on your last nerve and you need a pick me up!- Jennifer Stein, LPCMH



Just
for Fun

Virtual Tours: Click on the links below to go on a virtual adventure! Check back each week for different locations!

1. [Global Skyline Cameras](#) - This link will lead you to a website where you can explore *live* street view cameras of dozens of places around the world. You could explore cities, beaches, or historical landmarks. You might even see people enjoying the same skyline as you, but in person!
2. [The Nature Conversancy](#) - Take a virtual field trip to explore coral reefs, China's great forest, rainstorms in the desert, or rainforests! You could watch them all and then pick your favorite to discuss with your family.

Keeping Kids Engaged at Home: [70 Things to Do with Kids Stuck at Home](#)

**Brandywine School District
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Email Lauryn Elder for teacher questions: Lauryn.Elder@bsd.k12.de.us

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