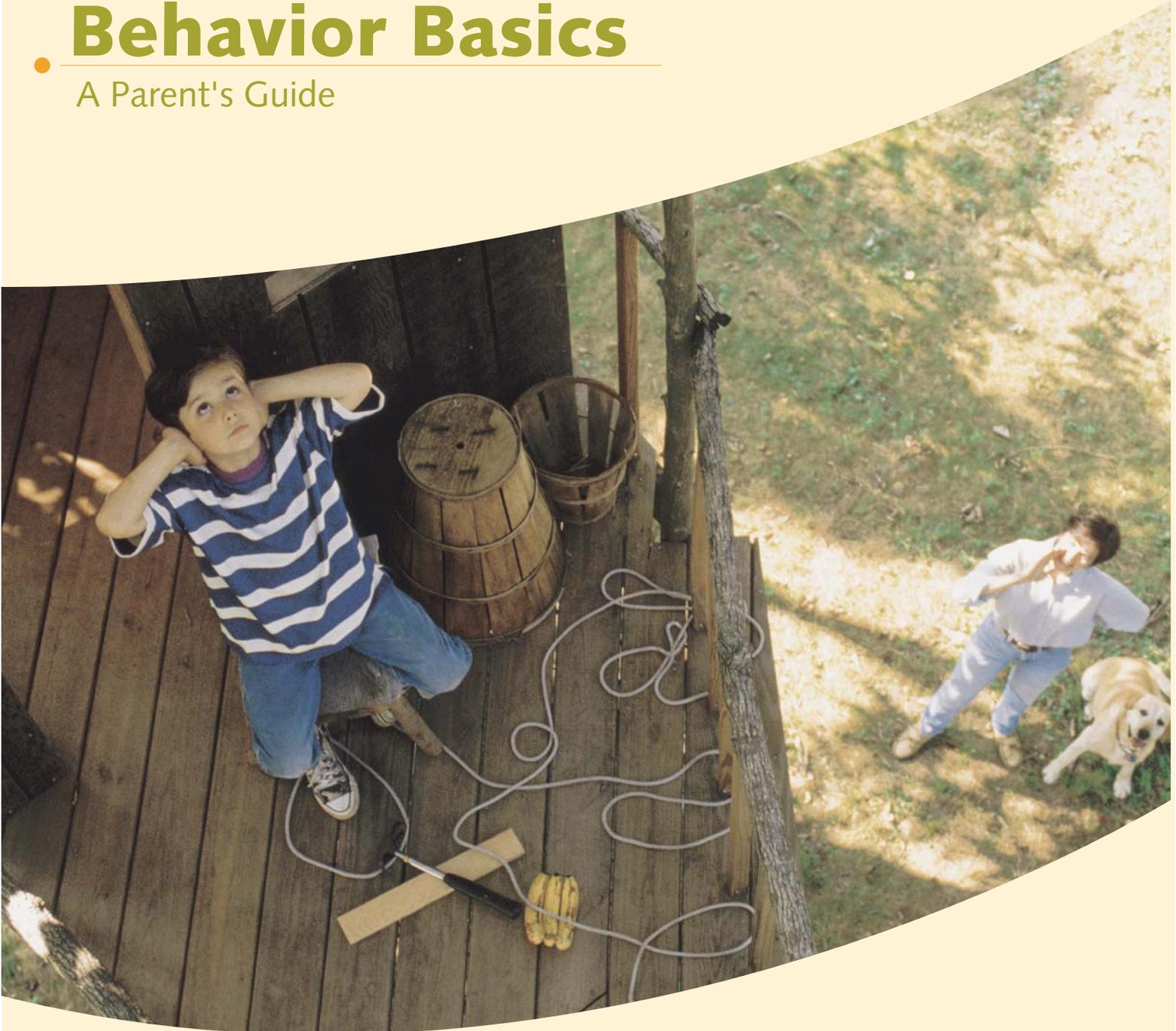


# Behavior Basics

A Parent's Guide



greatschools™

Featuring  
content created by

 Schwab Learning

## **Behavior Basics: A Parent's Guide**

Whether you and your child are just starting out on the LD journey, or you've hit a new roadblock, our *E-ssential Guide to Behavior Basics* will help you understand your child's behavior and steer him in the right direction. This collection includes articles and interviews featuring experts in the field. You'll also find a list of suggested resources on this topic.

This guide includes:

### **Articles**

---

- page **1** **How Does Temperament Affect My Child's Behavior?**  
By Nancy Firchow, M.L.S.
- page **4** **• Temperament Scale**
- page **5** **Management Strategies for Problematic Traits and Temperament**  
By Nancy Firchow, M.L.S.
- page **8** **Changing Children's Behavior in School**  
By Diana Browning Wright, M.A.
- page **10** **Encouraging Your Child with Learning Disabilities to Follow the Rules**  
By Betty Osman, Ph.D.
- page **13** **Parent Coaching for Children with AD/HD and Learning Disabilities**  
By Dr. Steven Richfield, Psy.D.

### **Resources**

---

- page **16** **Books, Articles and Websites**



## A Parent's Guide to Behavior Basics

### How Does Your Child's Temperament Affect Her Behavior?

How often have you heard a child described as “easy” or “difficult” or “shy until you get to know her?” These casual labels all refer to characteristics of temperament, those traits that influence how your child reacts in various situations.

Researchers<sup>1</sup> have described nine temperament traits which individually, or in combination, affect how well your child fits in at school, with peers, and even at home. Temperament influences how teachers, peers, and family relate to her, as well as how she relates to them. Your child's temperament directly affects how she approaches her school work and chores at home.

When a child's natural behavior doesn't fit with what is expected, social, family, or academic problems may arise. For a child with an identified learning disability (LD) or behavior issues, her particular temperament may help her achieve success more easily or it may compound her difficulties.

“When a child's natural behavior doesn't fit with what is expected, social, family, or academic problems may arise.”

Behaviors for each temperament trait described below fall along a continuum. Responses toward either the high or low end — while still completely normal — may be cause for concern.

#### The Nine Temperament Traits

**Activity Level:** amount of physical energy evident in typical daily activities and behavior.

Low Energy <-----> High Energy

At school, the more active child struggles to fit into an environment where suddenly she is expected to sit still for long periods of time. Her fidgeting and restlessness may disrupt the class and make it difficult for her to stay on task, but extra energy can be a benefit if channeled in a positive direction. In contrast, kids with low activity levels adapt well to a structured school day but may be viewed as unmotivated.

**Sensitivity:** sensory threshold, or how easily your child is bothered by changes in the environment.

Low sensitivity <-----> High Sensitivity

Kids who are highly sensitive are very aware of their environment and can be disrupted in countless ways: clothes may itch, noise may distract, the chair may be too hard. While these children often have a heightened awareness to others' thoughts and feelings, such a low sensory threshold may distract from studies and affect academic performance. Less sensitive kids are more tolerant of environmental sensations but may be slow to respond to warning signals, such as school bells and smoke detectors.

**Regularity:** rhythm or predictable recurrence of daily activities or routines (such as waking, hunger, becoming tired), a child's personal habits or patterns in after-school routines.

Low Predictability <-----> High Predictability

Children with high regularity enjoy a structured classroom but may have problems with changes in routine, such as a field trip. Kids with low regularity, on the other hand, may have difficulty following

---

## How Does Your Child's Temperament Affect Her Behavior?

---

the school routine and cause disruptions in class, yet are less bothered when things don't go according to the usual plan.

**Approach/Withdrawal:** initial reaction to new situations.

Withdraws <-----> Approaches

Bolder children approach new experiences with curiosity and openness but may jump in too quickly or react impulsively. Kids who are more hesitant prefer to hang back and watch for a while before engaging with a new person or activity, which may cause them to miss out on new experiences. A more cautious nature, though, does lower the risk of engaging in dangerous behaviors.

**Adaptability:** adjustment to new situations; length of time needed to accept changes in plan or routine. (This trait is different from Approach/Withdrawal in that it describes adjustment after the initial reaction to change.)

Slow to Adapt <-----> Adapts Easily

Adaptable children usually have an easier time; they tend to go with the flow. In school, this allows for ready adjustment to change but can also make the easy-going child more willing to adopt undesirable values or behaviors of peers. More rigid children, those slower to adapt, may be less susceptible to negative influences. However, they may find new situations stressful and difficult — a potential problem in school, where change is frequent and the number of transitions increase through the grades.

**Mood:** general tendency toward a happy or unhappy demeanor.

Negative <-----> Positive

While all children display a variety of emotions and reactions, from cheerful to glum, affectionate to grumpy, each child is predisposed toward a generally positive or negative mood. A more negative child may have difficulty being accepted by family, teachers, and peers, and it can be tough for caregivers to distinguish real problems from the child's typical mood. A child who always seems to be in a good mood fits in more easily but may not be dealing honestly with all the experiences in her life.

**Intensity:** amount of energy put into responses.

Less Responsive <-----> More Responsive

A very intense child laughs and cries loudly, loves things or hates them, and puts a great deal of emotion into her reactions, so it's easy to know where things stand. But a child who is overly responsive may drain a parent's or teacher's resources due to the child's intense feeling level. Kids who react mildly still feel all these emotions but do not exhibit such highs and lows in their responses. Low intensity is easier to deal with, but parents and teachers must be alert to more subtle signs of problems.

**Persistence:** ability to stick with a task in spite of distractions, interruptions, or frustration.

Low Persistence <-----> High Persistence

High persistence is strongly correlated with academic success. The child with excessive persistence, however, may be a perfectionist — unable to judge when a task is finished adequately or reluctant to turn in an assignment because she feels it's not good enough. The child with low persistence may have difficulty in school because of a tendency to become irritated or annoyed when interrupted or when a task becomes difficult. Her inclination to give up easily or to ask for help, rather than try things independently, can lead to incomplete assignments or difficulty staying focused.

---

## How Does Your Child's Temperament Affect Her Behavior?

---

**Distractibility:** tendency to be sidetracked by outside noise or interruptions.

High Distractibility <-----> Low Distractibility

Distractibility is not the opposite of persistence; a child can be easily distracted and yet show high persistence by returning quickly to the task at hand. A distractible child notices everything going on around her and may even be diverted by her own thoughts and daydreams. The opposite behavior in a child means she can concentrate despite any interruption. However, she may also tune out signals when it's time to move on to something different.

### Effects on Your Child

Extremes on each continuum of traits are not likely to guarantee success or failure in all situations; somewhere in the middle gives your child flexibility to adjust to a variety of conditions and expectations at school, at home, and in the community.

Consider that some combinations of traits can be more troublesome or more beneficial in school than others. High persistence can help the distractible student stay on task, whereas high distractibility combined with high activity and low persistence are strongly correlated to academic problems and bear a striking resemblance to the characteristics of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD).

Understanding the behavior traits of your child with LD or AD/HD helps you predict how she is likely to react in various situations. Are those traits liable to enhance her performance or cause additional problems for her? For example, auditory processing difficulties may be aggravated by low sensitivity; memory problems may be intensified by high distractibility. High persistence and low distractibility, on the other hand, tend to benefit most kids — with or without LD or AD/HD.

### Learn about Your Child's Temperament

Now, are you ready to apply these concepts to your own child? If so, use the *Temperament Scale* on the next page and rate your child.

When you have completed the scale, check out *Management Strategies for Problematic Traits of Temperament* in this publication. Here you'll find some tips on how to help your child if she exhibits traits that may cause difficulty for her.

### Reference

1. Thomas, A., & Chess, S. (1977). *Temperament and Development*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

---

Created: 04/01/2002

### About the Author

**Nancy Firchow** is a freelance writer and former librarian for Schwab Learning. She has a Masters degree in Library Science and has also worked as a medical research librarian.

## A Parent's Guide to Behavior Basics

### Temperament Scale<sup>1</sup>

**Directions:** Before beginning, take time to observe your child at home, at school, and with friends. Talk to other people who know him. Be sure to focus on all behaviors, not just those that seem problematic. After gathering information, rate your child on each of the nine traits. Place an X along the continuum where you believe he fits. Refer back to *How Does Temperament Affect My Child's Behavior?* to review the descriptions, if necessary. Remember the **whole** scale represents a normal temperament range —high and low do not necessarily mean “dysfunctional.”

**Activity Level:** amount of physical energy

Low Energy -----/-----/----- High Energy  
AVERAGE

**Sensitivity:** sensory threshold

Low Sensitivity -----/-----/----- High Sensitivity  
AVERAGE

**Regularity:** rhythm or predictable recurrence of daily activities or routines

Low Predictability -----/-----/----- High Predictability  
AVERAGE

**Approach/Withdrawal:** initial reaction to new situations.

Withdraws -----/-----/----- Approaches  
AVERAGE

**Adaptability:** length of time needed to adjust to new situations

Slow to Adapt -----/-----/----- Adapts Easily  
AVERAGE

**Mood:** general tendency toward a happy or unhappy demeanor.

Negative -----/-----/----- Positive  
AVERAGE

**Intensity:** amount of energy put into responses.

Less Responsive -----/-----/----- More Responsive  
AVERAGE

**Persistence:** ability to stick with a task in spite of distractions or frustration.

Low Persistence -----/-----/----- High Persistence  
AVERAGE

**Distractibility:** tendency to be sidetracked by outside noise or interruptions.

Highly Distractible -----/-----/----- Not Distractible  
AVERAGE

1. Thomas, A., & Chess, S. (1977). *Temperament and Development*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.



## A Parent's Guide to Behavior Basics

### Management Strategies for Problematic Traits of Temperament

After gathering information and rating your child's temperament, did you find any traits that fell at either end of the continuum? Although the whole scale represents a normal temperament range — high and low do not mean “dysfunctional” — some extreme traits can be problematic for kids at home, at school, and in the community. And remember that, for kids with learning differences, certain traits can either help or hinder success.

#### Tips for Managing the Extremes

Here are some tips for helping your child modify the traits that might be problematic for her. If you have other ideas that have worked, please share them on our Parent to Parent Message Board.

#### Activity Level

For the child with very **high** energy:

- Heed the signals that indicate it's time for your child to blow off steam, and find a way to let her do so.
- Incorporate some active time during the day. Walk to school instead of driving, or stop at the park on the way to go grocery shopping.
- Avoid using confinement as a method of discipline.

For the child with very **low** energy:

- Allow enough time for tasks and activities.
- Use a timer to set a goal for when a chore should be finished.
- Reward your child for sticking with a project and completing it in a timely fashion.

#### Sensitivity

For the child who shows **high** sensitivity:

- Acknowledge your child's feelings and provide ways for her to make herself more comfortable.
- Layer clothes to allow for adjustments on days that are too warm or too cold.
- Avoid overstimulation, e.g., loud music, strobe lights, noisy groups of people.

For the child who shows **low** sensitivity:

- Help her notice external cues by pointing out sounds in the environment, odors, and changes in the colors of stoplights.
- Explain interpersonal cues, such as facial expressions, body language, personal space.

#### Regularity

For the child who demonstrates **high** predictability:

- Provide advance warning of changes in routine.
- Help her learn to handle changes now to develop flexibility as she gets older.

---

## Management Strategies for Problematic Traits of Temperament

---

For the child who shows **low** predictability:

- Create routines, even if they seem odd. Ask her to sit down with the family for dinner even if she's not hungry or go to bed at a regular time even if she's not sleepy.
- Reward successes, such as turning in a paper on time.

### Approach/Withdrawal

For the child who **approaches** new situations easily:

- Provide firm rules and close supervision. This child is curious!
- Teach her to use reasonable caution with new people or in new situations.

For the child who **withdraws**:

- Allow time to adjust to new situations; let her set the pace.
- Quietly encourage her, without pushing, to try new activities and make new friends.

### Adaptability

For the child who is **slow** to adapt:

- Give plenty of warning about transitions.
- Role play or practice expected behaviors before going into new situations.
- Acknowledge the stress she feels in new situations and encourage her to talk about it.

For the child who adapts **too easily**:

- Teach her to make her own decisions rather than just go along with her peer group.
- Encourage her to find out all she can about an activity before signing up and committing her time.

### Mood

For the child who tends to be **negative**:

- Try to ignore her general negative mood, but tune in to real distress.
- Encourage her to recognize and talk about the things that make her happy.
- Act as a role model for positive social interactions.

For the child who's always **positive**:

- Be sensitive to subtle signs of unhappiness that she may be bottling up inside.
- Teach appropriate ways to express feelings of sadness, anger, fear, and frustration.

### Intensity

For the child who is **less** responsive:

- Don't equate a lack of intensity with lack of feelings.
- Watch and listen carefully to pick up more subtle clues to problems.

---

## Management Strategies for Problematic Traits of Temperament

---

For the child who is **overly** responsive:

- Teach her to control her emotional responses through anger management, self-talk, or calming strategies.

### Persistence

For the child who shows **low** persistence:

- Break tasks into small steps, and acknowledge small successes.
- Try timed work periods followed by short breaks.
- Reward her for sustained effort and finished assignments.

For the child who is **overly** persistent:

- Provide lots of warning before transitions.
- Remind him that it's not always possible to be perfect.

### Distractibility

For the child who is **highly** distractible:

- Reduce external distractions as much as possible.
- Keep instructions short.
- Use a special cue — gesture or word — to remind her to get back on task.

For the child who shows **low** distractibility:

- Cue her when it's time to move on to something new, e.g., say her name or touch her arm.
- Set a timer to remind her when to move on to the next task or activity.

### Appreciate Your Whole Child

No matter what your child's temperament, show respect and understanding; let her know you accept her the way she is. Her temperament traits combine to make her the very unique and special individual she is.

Remember that some traits seen as challenging in kids are valued later. The extremely open and approaching child becomes an adventurous and exploring adult who makes new discoveries. And the child with high energy and persistence could become the next Olympic gold medal winner!

---

Created: 04/01/2002 Modified: 03/12/2003

### About the Author

**Nancy Firchow** is a freelance writer and former librarian for Schwab Learning. She has a Masters degree in Library Science and has also worked as a medical research librarian.



## A Parent's Guide to Behavior Basics

### Changing Children's Behavior in School

Success in school involves being able to complete work, stay organized, get along with kids and adults, be positive about your own abilities and school, follow rules, and do your best work. But some kids with learning disabilities (LD) and/or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) also may develop behavior problems that add to the risk of failure. Here are a few warning signs:

- Your child has trouble following directions or getting along with other kids.
- She's discouraged or says she "hates school."
- She's frequently "in trouble" in school or sent to the principal's office.
- None of the usual techniques — rewards, consequences, home-school communication, behavior contracts — seem to help.

“Behavior is a form of communication, ... once you understand what her behavior communicates about her needs, you can help her learn more appropriate behaviors.”

#### What Do Kids Need?

Before we can understand children's behavior, we must understand their needs. In addition to their physical needs — food, clothing, shelter — kids need fun, freedom, power, and a sense of belonging. If these needs aren't met in positive ways, problems develop.

In some classrooms, kids have to sit quietly and listen for long periods of time, and this can be hard for them. Sometimes, you'll find your child just hasn't learned age-appropriate social skills. In either case, here are a few of the ways your child might express her needs through her behavior:

- **Freedom:** If I don't get some choice in the way I work or what I learn (freedom), I won't work at all.
- **Fun:** If my teacher never cracks jokes, seems to enjoy teaching, or thinks up interesting lessons (fun), I'll make my own fun.
- **Belonging:** If I don't feel I'm a one of the smart kids (belonging), I'll be one of the kids who has problems and show I don't care.
- **Power:** If I can't be a class leader, know a lot in a class discussion, or do an assignment well (power), I'll be the class clown and get noticed.

#### Why Do Behavior Problems Develop?

Kids with LD and/or AD/HD may not pick up on cues around them. They may not understand what teachers or other kids expect from them or how to bargain with others. They may have a hard time waiting for the teacher to call on them. They may have a problem concentrating on things that aren't interesting to them. They may not have learned skills to be a good group member — taking turns, giving and accepting feedback, getting agreement, and compromising.

---

## Changing Children's Behavior in School

---

If your child with LD and/or AD/HD also has these problems, she may decide, "I'd rather be bad than stupid!" She's figured out if she doesn't try hard or turn in assignments, others won't know just how difficult the work really is for her.

### How do you find the cause?

Think of behavior as an attempt to get something or complain about something. Since behavior is a form of communication, you'll need to figure out your child's message. Is she trying to gain something — attention, an opportunity to move around? Is she trying to escape or avoid something — doing an assignment she doesn't understand, sitting next to a child who annoys her? Once you understand what her behavior communicates about her needs, you can help her learn more appropriate behaviors.

### What happens next?

After you've figured out the "why" of your child's behavior, these questions will help you develop a plan of action.

- What new skill — behavior — should your child learn to replace the problem behavior?
- How will she learn the new behavior? Who will model (show her how to do) it — you, another child, the teacher? Where will she role play (practice) it? Who will cue (remind) her to use it?
- What changes need to be made in the child's environment — time of day, space, materials, interactions?
- What reinforcer will help her use the new behavior — stickers, a special activity or privilege, praise? How often should it be given? Who should give it?
- How should problem behavior be handled if it happens again? Are there specific words, cues, or consequences that should be used to stop the behavior quickly?
- How will everyone (child, parents, teachers) involved work together? How often should they communicate?

### Who should be involved?

When parents, teachers, kids, administrators, and other school staff develop a behavior plan together, success is more likely. Each person needs to understand his role and communicate with others involved.

Everyone, not just your child, needs rewards to keep a plan going. Send thank-you notes to your child's teacher or principal commenting the improvements you see. Let them know they're making a difference and you appreciate their efforts!

---

Created: 4/27/2001 Last Modified 1/24/2003

## About the Author

**Diana Browning Wright, M.A.**, is a behavior analyst, school psychologist, and trainer. She has experience with all grade levels and has written numerous manuals and articles to help educators deal with problem behavior. Diana has two children, one with a disability.

## A Parent's Guide to Behavior Basics

### Encouraging Your Child with Learning Disabilities to Follow the Rules

*Parents frequently complain their child with learning disabilities (LD) "doesn't listen" to them or adhere to family rules. They have tried a variety of disciplinary measures but "nothing seems to work." In this article, Betty Osman, Ph.D., tells parents what they can expect of their children with learning disabilities, and how to enforce expected standards of behavior.*

Rule-governed behavior is a necessary part of family life and all children/adolescents, with or without LD, need standards and expectations. Parents do children no favor when they "feel sorry" for them because of their LD and make no demands. When expectations are realistic and standards maintained, children feel more competent and confident of success.

Most parents learn through experience how to manage their children with LD and, conversely, what does not work. Telling an adolescent to be home at six o'clock for dinner, for example, may not ensure that she'll be there, particularly if she has problems with time and organization. A watch with an alarm or a phone call as a reminder will be more effective than a rebuke and a negative consequence when she is "late again." In other words, **anticipation and advance preparation may be the key in many situations, in addition, of course, to parent-child communication.**

“ When expectations are realistic and standards maintained, children feel more competent and confident of success..”

#### Three Levels of Rules

Although families differ along the strictness-permissiveness continuum and have different standards for compliance, it might help to conceptualize three levels of family rules. The first is the "have-to's" in the family, i.e., the short list of rules that are not negotiable and must be followed without debate or argument. These might include getting to school on time, using appropriate language in speaking to parents, and attending religious services, if that is a family value.

**In the second level or category**, a much longer list, are the "should-but-don't-have-to's." A child should wear a coat if it is cold or pouring rain, for example, but it is not a "must" because you don't get sick that way. Combing one's hair and daily showers are appropriate, but they may be discussed and even negotiated.

**The third category** includes **children's free choices** — clothing worn to school (within the school's dress code, of course), with whom they spend leisure time, and the extracurricular activities they select. I have found when families write their lists cooperatively, children usually recognize they have more autonomy and decision making than they previously thought. Children may think they want unlimited power, but it frightens them if they become omnipotent in the family. They feel more secure knowing their parents are authority figures whose job it is to protect them and keep them safe.

#### Elements of Discipline

Although anticipation and prevention generally are more effective than criticism or punishment after the fact, parents can't always prevent an infraction or a child's disregard of an established rule. What

Encouraging Your Child with Learning Disabilities to Follow the Rules

then can parents do when disciplinary measures are called for and no consequence they impose seems to make an impression on the child or adolescent with LD?

**First, it is important to remember that “discipline” literally means “teach,” not “punish.”** Furthermore, as Rick Lavoie, a recognized authority on LD says, negative consequences never change behavior, they only stop them in that particular time and setting. Positive consequences, on the other hand, have been shown to be far more effective in changing inappropriate behavior patterns. Children respond well to praise, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. Complimenting a child for a responsible, cooperative, or compassionate act will tend to promote that behavior.

“ When expectations are realistic and standards maintained, children feel more competent and confident of success..”

There are occasions, however, when negative consequences become necessary. Insofar as possible, they should always be immediate, definite, and most of all, relevant. Young people with LD tend not to perceive cause and effect and are likely to have short memories, so prolonged punishments not only lose their impact, but also their effectiveness.

Taking away a child's favorite toy or the privilege of going to a movie for being rude to parents, for example, is not relevant to the infraction. The focus for the young person, then, becomes the lost toy or movie and his anger at his parents, rather than what he did to incur the punishment in the first place. A more appropriate consequence might be for the parent to respond, “I won't listen to that kind of talk,” and walk away.

If a child leaves his bicycle outside overnight despite warnings to put it away, the child might not have the privilege of riding for one day, meeting the criteria of immediate, definite, and relevant.

**Effective and Ineffective Disciplinary Techniques**

A word about the use of “time-outs,” which were never intended to be used as punishment. Rather, the purpose was to remove a child from the offending stimulus. In this vein, a frustrated parent saying to a child, “I need a time-out because I'm feeling angry” or “We both need a time-out” conveys the message to the child that separation is in order to prevent an unpleasant confrontation, and both parties share the responsibility.

Teasing and threatening a child are not just ineffectual disciplinary measures, they are also highly destructive, particularly for children who are sensitive to criticism. Teasing, after all, can be an expression of hostility said with a smile, and most children quickly become aware of the underlying feelings. And clearly physical punishment does not work, except to exacerbate the child's anger and teach him violent retaliation is acceptable.

In addition to advance preparation and mutual time-outs, two other techniques may be effective. The first is to ignore the undesirable behavior, withdrawing attention from the child. Children with LD crave attention, almost at any price, and negative attention certainly is more desirable than no attention. A second strategy is to model appropriate behavior, based on the principle that imitation is a basic form of learning, beginning in early childhood.

To sum up, disciplining a child or adolescent with LD is not an easy task, particularly in light of some of these characteristics commonly associated with learning disabilities:

- the inability to perceive cause and effect and to generalize from one situation to another

---

## Encouraging Your Child with Learning Disabilities to Follow the Rules

---

- a short memory for misdeeds but not for the consequences
- the tendency to blame others rather than assume responsibility for his behavior.

With patience, humor, and a sense of perspective, parents can become their child's ally, even in their role of authority.

---

Created: 7/6/2002

### About the Author

**Betty Osman, Ph.D.**, is on the staff of the White Plains Hospital Center, Department of Behavioral Health, Child and Adolescent Service. She has authored several books, journal articles, and videos. Dr. Osman serves on the Board of Directors of the National Center for Learning Disabilities.



## A Parent's Guide to Behavior Basics

### Parent Coaching For Children with AD/HD and Learning Disabilities

Parents of children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) and/or learning disabilities (LD) daily contend with some very challenging parenting tasks. Whether you're facilitating home-school communication, providing support with schoolwork, or responding to your child's social and emotional issues, parent advocacy is critical to your child's happiness and success. Yet, you may spend so much energy trying to help make the outside world more manageable for your child that you find yourself on "low fuel light" when behavior problems arise at home. I've developed a parent coaching system that involves proactive intervention, with parents acting as guides for their children's behavior both at home and in the "real world."

#### The Self-Control and Social Skills Challenge

If your child has AD/HD and/or LD, you're probably well aware of any problems she has with self-control and social skills. Typical problems include:

- low tolerance for frustration and disappointment
- difficulty making sound decisions
- a limited repertoire of social skills

These problems may cause frequent conflict between you and your child at home. In an effort to curtail problems, many parents turn to the traditional behavior management technique of reward and punishment. While that approach has certain benefits, it doesn't promote self-control and good decision making in children. The reward-and-punishment approach may also place the parent in an adversarial role with the child.

As a child psychologist who specializes in the treatment of AD/HD and LD, I devote much of my time to training parents and children to use a coaching program that promotes self-control and social skills. The parent coaching approach stresses the importance of viewing a child's behavior as a "window" through which to assess her skills. Coaching teams up parent and child to practice strategies for coping with the hurdles of AD/HD and LD.

#### A Child's "Thinking Side" vs. "Reacting Side"

Coaching is ideally suited to the needs of children with AD/HD and LD. Problems with impulsivity, persistence, and judgment are addressed by the parent coaching principles of preparation, practice, and review. You approach your coaching role with a practical framework for helping your child understand what goes wrong. Underlying this framework are the concepts of your child's "thinking side" and her "reacting side."

- The **thinking side** is the part of your child's mind that makes good decisions and watches over her behavior.

“ Perhaps most important is a readiness to listen to your child's point of view, paying careful attention to the words that reflect her perceptions and beliefs. ”

---

## Parent Coaching For Children with AD/HD and Learning Disabilities

---

- The **reacting side** is the part of your child's mind that reacts emotionally, and without thinking, to certain events in her life.

This common sense framework paves the way for you to introduce your child to related concepts, such as triggers, helpful self-talk, power talk, and figuring out the clues and self-instructions in life.

### The Verbal Playbook

I recommend that as a parent coach, you establish and maintain a safe and trusting dialogue with your child. The goal is to help your child with AD/HD or LD break new ground by understanding her own struggles. Ideally, you will possess a calm voice, nurturing demeanor, and open mind. It's also helpful to acknowledge your own triggers. Perhaps most important is a readiness to listen to your child's point of view, paying careful attention to the words that reflect her perceptions and beliefs. This provides a glimpse into the self-talk landscape that fuels your child's reacting side behaviors and makes it so difficult for her to learn from her mistakes. As the parent-child dialogue proceeds, you'll want to refer back to your child's words to illustrate how negative self-talk impedes positive change.

“The traditional behavior management technique of reward and punishment ... may also place the parent in an adversarial role with the child.”

You can bolster your child's willingness to discuss her troubles by your choice of words. Saying, “Now that I've heard your side, maybe there's a lesson for both of us to learn,” can help soothe her raw emotions. Rather than sounding like a judging adversary, you are perceived as an ally.

### Touching on Triggers

Triggers are situations, or “hot buttons,” that tend to set us off. You might start by telling your child about your own triggers (which she may already be well aware of!). You might say something like this: “We all have triggers that set off our reacting side, like when I get really angry with myself for misplacing things.” Next explain that if we are willing to calmly discuss what has taken place, not only can we learn to watch out for triggers but we can use strategies to keep our thinking side in charge. This gesture opens up a pathway for you to offer knowledge and tools to reveal your child's triggers and develop a game plan for correction.

Typical triggers that heat up the reacting side in children with AD/HD and LD fall into three broad categories:

- self-esteem (or “pride injuries”)
- frustration of desires (or “not getting what I want”)
- social encounters (or “dealing with people”)

Provide details of what you observe and how your child's reacting side gets her into trouble. For example, you might tell your child, “When your brother calls you a name (social encounter), your reacting side is quickly triggered and you throw a tantrum.”

### Don't Take the Bait!

Next, present a proactive solution to your child. “We can prepare your thinking side to stay in control by planning what you'll say to yourself (helpful self-talk) and what you'll say to your brother (power

---

## Parent Coaching For Children with AD/HD and Learning Disabilities

---

talk). That way you don't take his bait." Explain that being "baited" by people, or even situations, is both common and controllable.

You can reinforce the self-control goal of "not taking the bait" by explaining the importance of helpful self-talk and power talk when facing triggers. "If you are prepared for baiting, and you tell yourself, 'I'm not going to take his bait,' and simply say to him, 'I see what you're doing, and I'm not going there,' you'll keep your cool." Such a dialogue epitomizes the kid-friendly "verbal playbook" that parents and kids build as they review triggers. During role play, you might play the role of the "baiter," while your child rehearses her self-talk and power talk strategies.

### Coaching to Win

Parent coaching is a way to help your child develop the self-control and social skills required in today's complicated, fast-paced world. It also provides you with a pathway to make the most of "teachable moments" when gaps appear between your child's skills and outside expectations. When engaged in the safety of a coaching dialogue, your child will welcome these concepts with interest and openness, realizing in the long run she will reap the benefits of empowerment.

---

Created: 3/17/2003

### About the Author

**Steven Richfield, Psy.D.** is a child psychologist and author in Plymouth Meeting, PA. He has developed a child-friendly self-control/social skills building program called *Parent Coaching Cards*, now in use all over the world.



## A Parent's Guide to Behavior Basics

### Resources

#### Understanding Your Child's Behavior

##### On the Web

American Academy of Pediatrics: Development and Behavior

[http://www.medem.com/MedLB/article\\_detailb.cfm?article\\_ID=ZZZ8QW1A79C&sub\\_cat=21](http://www.medem.com/MedLB/article_detailb.cfm?article_ID=ZZZ8QW1A79C&sub_cat=21)

American Academy of Pediatrics: You and Your Child's Behavior

[http://www.medem.com/MedLB/article\\_detailb.cfm?article\\_ID=ZZZFBI8B79C&sub\\_cat=21](http://www.medem.com/MedLB/article_detailb.cfm?article_ID=ZZZFBI8B79C&sub_cat=21)

#### Understanding Your Child's Temperament

##### Books

The Difficult Child

by Stanley Turecki

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0553380362/>

Know Your Child: An Authoritative Guide for Today's Parents

by Stella Chess & Alexander Thomas.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0465037313/>

Understanding Your Child's Temperament

by William B. Carey, M.D.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0028628268/>

Your Child's Unique Temperament: Insights and Strategies for Responsive Parenting

by Sandee Graham McClowry, M.D.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0878224912/>

#### Strategies for Managing Your Child's Behavior

##### Books

1-2-3 Magic : Effective Discipline for Children 2-12

by Thomas W. Phelan

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0963386190/>

The Parent Coach: A New Approach to Parenting in Today's Society

by Steven Richfield, Psy.D. with Carol Borchert (illustrator)

<http://www.sopriswest.com/swstore/product.asp?sku=792>

---

## Resources

---

### Strategies for Managing Your Child's Behavior (*continued*)

Parent Coaching Cards: Social and Emotional Tools for Children  
by Steven Richfield, Psy.D. with Carol Borchert (illustrator)  
<http://parentcoachcards.com/>

Parent Coaching Cards: Social and Emotional Tools for Children  
by Steven Richfield, Psy.D. with Carol Borchert (illustrator)  
<http://parentcoachcards.com/>

Raising Your Spirited Child  
by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0060923288/>

SOS! Help for Parents: A Practical Guide for Handling Common Everyday Behavior Problems  
by Lynn Clark, Ph.D., John Robb (illustrator)  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935111204/qid=1028073648/>

Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child's Inborn Traits  
by Helen Neville and Diane Clark Johnson  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1884734340/>

Understanding Temperament: Strategies for Creating Family Harmony  
by Lyndall Shick  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1884734324/>

When Anger Hurts Your Kids: A Parent's Guide  
by Matthew McKay (Editor).  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1572240458/>

Win the Whining War & Other Skirmishes: A Family Peace Plan  
by Cynthia Whitham, M.S.W.  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0962203637/>