

A photograph of a man and a young boy sitting on a wooden fence in a park. The man, on the left, is wearing a yellow cable-knit sweater and khaki pants, looking down at the boy. The boy, on the right, is wearing a red sweater and khaki pants, leaning on the fence and looking back at the man. The background is a blurred green and yellow foliage, suggesting an autumn setting. The ground is covered with fallen leaves.

# 3 B's of Effective Parenting: Be Proactive, Be Positive, and Be Consistent

by Michelle Marchant and K. Richard Young



**P**arenting is a role that many people undertake with both joy and trepidation: eager to provide effectively for their children's physical and emotional needs, but often feeling fearful that they may lack the necessary skills. Parents often approach educators, school psychologists, social workers, and others who are trained in parent/child issues seeking solutions for their children's problem behavior. Researchers and practitioners have examined and recommended a wide variety of strategies for attending to children's social and emotional development, as well as correcting their children's problem behaviors. In an effort to identify strategies that are feasible, acceptable, and effective for parents the authors reviewed several approaches suggested by professionals.\* Their search uncovered three simple strategies: be proactive, be positive, and be consistent.

## BE PROACTIVE

All behavior is learned, sometimes incidentally and other times through formal or informal teaching. There are three ways in which parents can proactively teach acceptable behavior while attending to their children's emotional and social development: (a) Establish expectations, (b) promote social development

through pre-teaching, and (c) prepare the child by teaching and prompting appropriate behavior when occasions arise.

### Establish Expectations

Teaching children reasonable expectations gives direction and helps set limits so children and youth do not have to "guess" what it is their parents (and others) expect of them. If parents expect their children to complete their homework before they can play with their friends, then it is wise for the parents to state that expectation to their children at the beginning of the school year and explain why it is important. Establishing and discussing expectations up front is also likely to minimize the chance for conflict between children and parents. The ultimate purpose of establishing expectations with children and youth is to give them the necessary skills and allow them to be responsible for managing their own behavior.

### Pre-teach

Teaching an expected behavior or social skill before a child needs to use that skill is another proactive method of promoting social development. When a child is developmentally ready to learn how to tie his shoes, the parent takes time to model for and practice with the child so that he learns how to tie his laces. When it is time for a child to learn to read, a parent might engage the

child in reading activities. No one expects a child to tie shoes or to read by instinct. Yet somehow it is assumed that a child will automatically "know" how to behave in public, as well as in school and home environments. Recently, one of the authors witnessed a mother discuss with three of her teenage children the proper etiquette they should use in public places, such as assisting the elderly and opening doors for women. In this situation the mother verbally rehearsed with her children the appropriate and expected behavior for given contexts— an excellent, proactive form of promoting social development.

A proactive approach to discipline offers opportunities for a child to actually rehearse the expected behavior in a safe and structured environment prior to using it in a more formal setting (Young, Black, Marchant, Mitchem, & West, 2000). Taking a proactive approach to teaching allows the parent to identify a needed skill, break the skill into steps, describe and model the steps, and then have the child practice each step as the parent provides prompts, feedback, and praise. For example, when a child is learning to tie his shoes the parent divides the process into simple steps, models the steps, and then helps the child to practice each step until he can successfully tie his shoes. A similar process can be effective in teaching children social behavior.



## Prepare the child

A proactive approach to teaching behavior is more likely to lead to successful use of appropriate social skills by children when the occasion arises. Consider this example of a mother teaching her child how to introduce himself to invited dinner guests prior to the guests' arrival: "Mark, I am going to teach you how to introduce yourself to people because tonight we have guests coming to dinner, and I want you to greet them politely. When they come, I want you to look them in the eye, shake their hands, and say, 'Hello, my name is Mark. Welcome to our home.' This helps guests feel more relaxed and helps us make friends." The parent then models these steps for the child and also has the child practice. After the child correctly performs the skill, the parent says, "Mark, you did a great job of showing me how you will introduce yourself to our guests tonight." Imagine the satisfaction a mother would have when watching her children appropriately introduce themselves to the dinner guests after giving them this prompt for the desired behavior!

The following format is a useful guide for parents when teaching a child social skills:

- Name and describe the skill (e.g., how to show gratitude, make polite requests, invite someone to play)
- Give the child a reason why the social skill is important
- Model the skill
- Have the child practice the skill
- Give positive and corrective feedback and praise for practicing the skill (Young et al., 2000).

This method can be used to teach a variety of social behaviors, such as, how to ask for help, how to share toys, and/or how to introduce oneself to dinner guests. This teaching approach works well in family group meetings or as a one-on-one interaction.

If your child has already been taught the acceptable behavior, prompts are still good reminders. For example, "Mark, do you remember how I taught you to introduce yourself to guests?" Mark responds, "Yes." Mother has Mark repeat the steps and then encourages him to repeat

the behavior with new neighbors.

## Be Positive

Positive feedback serves a variety of functions when teaching children pro-social behavior. One function is that it strengthens the desirable behavior that parents want their children to learn and use. For example, a three-year-old boy was told by his mother to stay close to his aunt while visiting a zoo. Returning home, this three-year-old said, "Mom, I didn't go away from her," to which the aunt immediately replied, "Yes, I didn't have to worry because you stayed close to me and held my hand! This helped make our trip fun." It is highly probable that during the next excursion only a brief reminder from the child's mother to "stay close" will be required, because his previous behavior was recognized and praised in a genuine and specific manner. Sincere praise increases the likelihood that a behavior will be repeated.

Another benefit of praise and commendation is the development of strong, positive relationships. When a person calls

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attention to the positive actions or characteristics of another person, this behavior typically creates a positive relationship between the two people. Negative criticism tends to have the opposite effect. Praise is an investment in a positive relationship; criticism has a weakening effect (Young, West, Marchant, Morgan, & Mitchem, 1997). A person who invests money wisely increases his credit rating. The same is true when building a relationship with a child—the wiser the investment, the higher

the returns in trust, respect, and gratitude.

Children who regularly receive sincere praise and have a positive relationship with an adult are more likely to accept constructive criticism when it is necessary. Children who are complimented give compliments in return. They are also more inclined to recognize praiseworthy acts and give genuine praise to others. Furthermore, praise is often reciprocal, a process which develops a positive attitude and self-confidence in the child. One mother reported to the authors that when she praised her child she noticed that her child began to express appreciation for her service to him; whereas he had rarely acknowledged such acts in the past.

But not all praise is equally effective. Immediate praise, rather than delayed praise, is more likely to improve a child's appropriate behavior and help strengthen the parent-child relationship (Marchant & Young, 2001). Consider the following: A parent asks a child to pick up the toys in her room and she quickly does the task. An example of effective praise is for the parent to immediately say to the child (in



a calm, pleasant voice), “Marcia, you’re so fast and you picked up every toy!” Immediate positive feedback helps maintain children’s behavior; therefore, parents must be attentive to their children’s socially appropriate actions and follow through with specific praise as soon as possible.

In addition to being immediate, effective praise must be sincere, specific, and contingent upon the occurrence of the desired behavior (Marchant & Young, 2001). In a research study conducted by Willner et al. (1977), children indicated to the researchers that they appreciate adults who use a calm voice, compliment them, and demonstrate enthusiasm. Furthermore, adults should praise less when it is not deserved, reserving praise for times when the child exhibits appropriate behavior. If a teenager arrives home at the designated time, a father could say, in a sincere manner, “I appreciate the way you respected your curfew time.” If the teenager was late for

his curfew, it would be inappropriate for the father to deliver the same praise “in hopes” that the child would change his behavior in the future.

## Be Consistent

All behavior, whether appropriate or inappropriate, is followed by consequences (positive, negative, or neutral). A consequence is a direct result of behavior. Consequences may be natural or planned (Latham, 1994). Latham indicates that a natural consequence is a result that is likely to occur due to the nature of the person’s behavior; in contrast, a planned response is arranged by another individual. Within the contexts of natural and planned, consequences can be either positive or negative. The table below provides illustrations.

Latham offers four guidelines for selecting and implementing consequences. First, conse-

quences need to be understood up front by parents and children in order to reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and to prevent parents from imposing illogical consequences during frustrating moments. It is wise to hold a family meeting in which the parent and child discuss consequences that align with family expectations. These consequences must meet the needs of each particular family and child. Examples of positive consequences might include reading together, enjoying a physical activity such as bike riding, playing a game, watching a video, or enjoying a treat; negative consequences may include having no friends over that day, having toys taken away, or being refused use of the car or access to the television, the phone, and/or the computer.

Second, consequences must be reasonable, and parents need to select consequences that are aligned with the child’s behavior. For example, if the child plays

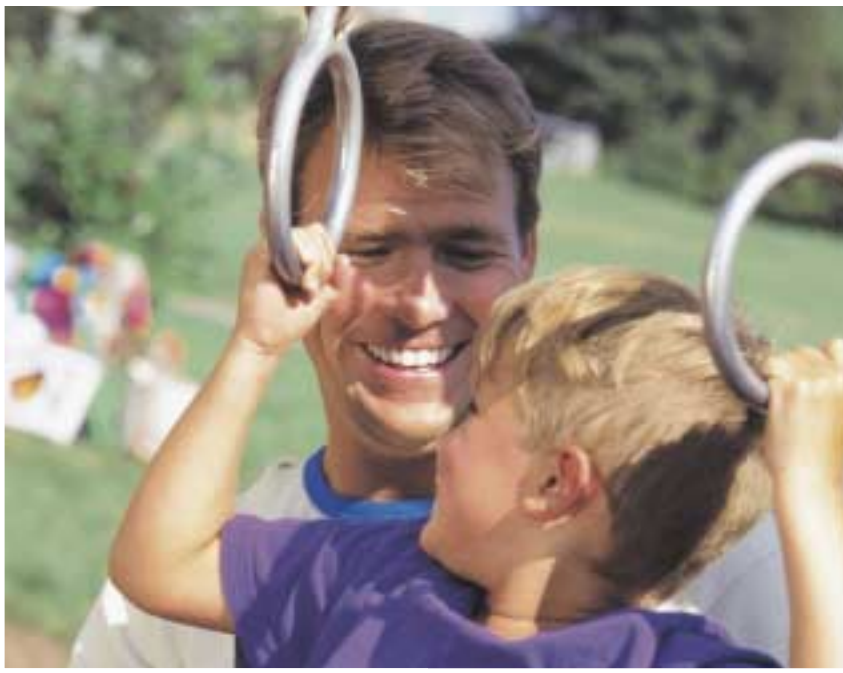
Table 1. Types and Examples of Consequences

TYPE	BEHAVIOR	CONSEQUENCE
Planned Positive	Teenager completes homework.	Parent gives the youth phone privileges.
Planned Negative	Child throws a tantrum at the toy store.	Parent immediately walks the child out of the store and takes the child home without purchasing a toy.
Natural Positive	Child eats food that is on dinner plate.	Child feels is satisfied.
Natural Negative	Teenager leaves bicycle outside in the rain for an entire week.	Paint on the bike begins to chip and peel. Rust begins to form.

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with his toys and walks away without picking up the toys, a logical consequence would be to have the child return and clean up the toys; in contrast, an illogical consequence would be for the child who does not pick up his toys to be put into timeout. The consequence would be logical if a teenager who arrives home late to complete chores and homework even though she is very tired. This is a more natural consequence of her behavior than withholding all of her social privileges for an entire week.

A third guideline for establishing consequences is that they must be manageable. If a father promises a child that if he cleans his room the parent will play a game with him, the father must be sure that he has time in his schedule to play the game. If the consequence for a teenager breaking his curfew is that he will lose his driving privileges

for a week, the mother must be certain that she can transport him (or arrange transportation) to critical events. When selecting a consequence, a parent must make sure the rest of the family is not “penalized” when the consequence is put into effect.

Finally, consequences need to be delivered in a precise, accurate, and consistent manner. If a father promised a son five dollars for mowing the lawn, the money should be given at a scheduled time after the lawn is mowed. If the father does not have the money at that exact moment, it is critical for the father to inform the child when the money will be delivered and to deliver it in a timely manner.

This is similar to the principle of immediacy previously discussed in relation to praise. Follow-through is critical for all parent behavior. If a child is noncompliant to his parent’s instructions, the parent should immediately deliver the predetermined consequence. A parent who follows this guideline increases the probability that the child will adhere to the family’s boundaries and expectations. A parent who is inconsistent in delivering consequences tempts the child to test the parent’s limits through inappropriate behavior.

These strategies are useful in helping parents enhance their parenting skills. Through the consistent application of these strategies, parents will experience positive family relationships,

well-balanced and socially competent children, and a pleasant home. In addition, families will enjoy an atmosphere of respect with less contention. Children who are taught well at home and are appreciated and recognized by their family are better adjusted, happier, and more confident. Children truly benefit from parents who learn to be proactive, positive, and consistent. <sup>WJ</sup>

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\*See Dembo, Sweitzer, & Lauritzen, 1985; Graziano & Diament, 1992; Kazdin, 1997; Marchant & Young, 2001; McPherson, Skok, & McLaughlin, 1990; Reimers, Wacker, & Koepl, 1987; Sanders & James, 1983; Sprague & Walker, 2000; Tolan & McKay, 1996; Wiese & Kramer, 1988; Williams, & McLaughlin, 1991.