

# Guiding Children's Behaviour



## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Guiding Children’s Behaviour .....	3
A: Child Development Principles.....	4
B: Environment .....	5
C. Guidance Strategies	
Prevention .....	6
Intervention.....	9
D. Challenging Behaviours .....	12
Summary .....	13
A Quick Guide .....	14

Originally developed in collaboration with the BC Day Care Action Coalition and the Early Childhood Educators of B.C. 1996. Revised 2003/02/25, 2016/11/4

## **Introduction**

Children need adults to teach, guide, and support them as they grow and learn. Child care providers play an important role in guiding children's behavior in positive, supportive, and age-appropriate ways. The most appropriate ways to guide behavior may differ from child to child and will depend on the child's age and developmental abilities and needs.

Positive and supportive guidance helps children as they learn self-regulation and find appropriate ways to express their wants, needs, views and feelings. Guiding children's behaviour is an ongoing process.

This booklet provides recommended practices for behaviour guidance; prevention and intervention strategies and techniques that are based on age-appropriate child development. This booklet also supports the Child Care Licensing Regulation requirement for licensed child care facility's to have a written behavioral guidance policy.

## **Guiding Children's Behaviour**

Guidance provides children with appropriate and positive models of behaviour and helps them to develop respect, self-regulation, self-confidence and sensitivity as they learn and grow. Guidance is needed while appropriate behaviour is happening, as well as before, during, and after inappropriate behaviour is displayed.

“Emotional and behavioural self-regulation contributes to young children's growing independence. It is this growing ability to control their own feelings and behaviour that eventually allows a child to become more skilled in their relationships with children and adults, for example, when playing together or making decisions together. In the preschool years, children's self-regulation skills are still developing and can often go up and down. Being able to consistently regulate their own feelings and behaviour is a major task for a young child.

By school age, children become more flexible and are better at regulating their own emotions and actions. When children learn to self-regulate they have stronger friendships and relationships, are more able to pay attention and learn new things and deal with the normal stresses and disappointments of daily life. ”<sup>i</sup>

## A: Child Development Principles

Children's behaviour is influenced by their age and level of development, their environment, and the adults who care for them. Caregivers need to understand that children experiment and make mistakes as a normal and expected part of their development. It is important to have reasonable expectations that are consistent with each child's age, developmental stage and abilities. Caregivers need to take time to offer developmentally appropriate guidance and explanations to help children gain confidence, competence, and problem-solving skills. Caregivers can be more effective in guiding behaviour and supporting children when they have an understanding of the different developmental stages and abilities of children they care for.

Children's experience in their family and culture influences their behaviour. Knowledge about a child's family and cultural background as well as respect for different value systems will help caregivers respond sensitively to the varying approaches to raising and caring for children.

Caregivers who understand and appreciate principles of child development and family and cultural influences will develop attitudes and practices which are based on realistic expectations of children's behaviour.



## **B: Environment**

Caregivers who are knowledgeable about the ways that social and physical environments affect behaviour can plan their settings accordingly.

### ***Space***

The way in which space is used can either encourage or discourage appropriate behaviour. It is important that enough space is available for children to play and learn in a relaxed setting. Minimize conflict by providing areas that are designated for adults or children, and/or individuals or groups. Space that is pleasant to the eye, well-planned, organized and safe contributes to a positive environment and decreases the potential for problems.

### ***Things***

Toys and materials that are in good supply, and are age and developmentally appropriate, encourage children to focus and become involved in productive learning experiences. With groups of infants and toddlers, providing duplicates of favorite toys is important, as young children have not yet learned how to share and having duplicates with reduce avoidable conflicts.

### ***People***

Children learn to interact with each other by seeing what the adults around them do. Adults need to create an environment that promotes trust, security, and comfort for the child. An adult's verbal and physical communication skills are critical in modelling the positive behaviour they wish children to learn.

### ***Time / Program Schedule***

Schedules, routines, and enough time for changes/transitions are important for children and help children gain trust, security, and order. While these can be flexible, caregivers need to provide children with information about what is expected. Children need a balanced day of active and rest periods, individual and group activities, as well as adult initiated play.

## **C. Guidance Strategies**

### **Prevention**

#### ***Set Clear, Consistent, & Simple Limits***

---

Limits are statements of what behaviour is appropriate. Limits ensure children know what is expected. Limits should be few in number, consistently enforced, and within the child's ability to understand. For example:

- "Inside we walk."
- "Hands must be washed before we eat."

#### ***Give Easy to Understand Explanations for Limits***

---

When children understand the reasons for limits, they are more likely to follow them. Teaching children the 'why' of a limit helps them internalize and learn the rules.

For example:

- "Sand stays down low so it doesn't get in people's eyes."
- "When you put the toys back on the shelf, others can find them."

#### ***Say Limits in a Positive Way, Rather Than in a Negative Way***

---

When adults focus on what to do, rather than what not to do, they reinforce what is appropriate, are models for children to copy, and decrease the likelihood for children to respond with defensiveness or resistance. For example:

- "It's time to put the blocks away."
- "Turn the pages gently."
- Rather than: "Don't leave the blocks on the floor."
- Rather than: "Don't be rough with the book."

#### ***Focus on the Behaviour, Rather Than on the Child***

---

Focus on a child's behaviour. Give positive guidance for learning. Some messages can be seen as attacking or critical of a child's character and may produce feelings of guilt and shame and lower self-esteem. For example:

- "When you grab the truck, it makes Sam angry."
- "It's not safe to climb on tables."
- Rather than: "You're so rude."
- Rather than: "You naughty boy, get off the table."

## ***Say What is Expected, Rather Than Ask***

---

It is important to state, rather than to ask when establishing limits or expected behaviours. Asking questions implies that the child has a choice, when there may not be a choice.

For example:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ○ “It’s time to clean up now.”<br>Rather than: “Do you want to help clean up?” | ○ “Your mommy is here. It’s time to go home.”<br>Rather than: “Do you want to go home now?” |
|--|---|

## ***Provide Choices***

---

Providing choices for young children can often help to avoid power struggles. Choices should only be offered when they are appropriate. For example:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ○ “Do you want to put your pants on first, or your shirt?”<br>Rather than: “Get dressed now.” | ○ “Do you want to have carrots or cucumbers with your sandwich?”<br>Rather than: “You need to eat more vegetables.” |
|---|---|

## ***Give Children Enough Time to Respond to Expectations***

---

Children respond better when they know what is going to happen. Children need cues and warnings ahead of time to help them to prepare for change. Adults should give children time to respond instead of demanding immediate action or results. For example:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ○ “In five minutes, it will be time to clean up.”<br>Rather than: “Get that cleaned up now.” | ○ “When everyone is sitting quietly, then I will begin the story.”<br>Rather than: “If you don’t sit down there won’t be a story.” |
|--|--|

## ***Ignore Minor Incidents***

---

Adults who work with young children need to develop tolerance for a certain amount of noise, clutter, and attention-seeking behaviour. As long as children’s activities are safe, not harming others or the environment, it is often best to ‘take a breath,’ rather than to speak.

## ***Reinforce Appropriate Behaviour, With Both Words and Gestures***

---

When children are behaving appropriately, it is important to acknowledge this through words or gestures. Positive reinforcement helps children build self-confidence and encourages them to repeat appropriate behaviours. Adults need to focus on the specific behaviour, rather than on the character of the child. For example:

- “Thank you for taking turns with Kathy. That’s called being kind.”  
Rather than: “You good girl.”
- “When you tidy up, it makes our room safe.”  
Rather than: “You’re my best helper.”

## ***Encourage Children to Use You as a Resource***

---

Children need to know that the adult is there to protect, guide, and help them. Encourage children to come to you to ask questions or ask for help. When children see an adult responding in a fair and supportive manner they feel a greater sense of security and comfort and are more likely to model that behaviour. For example:

- “If you’re not sure what to do, ask me, and I’ll help you.”  
Rather than: “That’s hard for you, so I’ll do it.”
- “I’ll stand beside you while you ask Carlos if you can join in.”  
Rather than: “Don’t be silly, talk to Carlos yourself.”

## ***Be Alert***

---

When adults actively engage with children and observe children in their activities, they are in a better position to anticipate potential difficulties and step in to prevent problems.

## ***Proximity/Nearness***

---

It is often necessary to stay close by when younger children are still learning to play together.





## Intervention

While the previous strategies will help to create a positive environment and minimize inappropriate behaviour, there will still be episodes of inappropriate behaviour. At times, adults will need to intervene. The following strategies, or a combination of these strategies, will help ensure that guidance is positive and supportive, rather than negative and harsh.



### ***Get a Child's Attention in a Respectful Way***

---

Other than situations where children are in physical danger, adults should approach children individually, state their name, and get down to the child's eye level. When speaking to a child, be aware of the tone of your voice; a soft, kind tone of voice can make a child feel safe, secure, and cared for, while a loud, harsh tone can make a child feel hurt, or self-conscious. Pay attention to your facial expressions and body movements to make sure they support the words you are using.

### ***Use Proximity and Touch***

---

Simply moving close to a child, moving between two children or putting an arm around a child can calm them and serve as effective guidance and intervention technique. This may be a helpful strategy if a child is biting, hitting, pinching, or kicking.

### ***Reminders***

---

Use simple, positive reminders to clarify and reinforce limits. Toddlers and preschoolers have a short attention span and can become easily distracted when engaged in activities. Adults must be prepared to remind often. For example:

- "The bikes stay on the bike paths."    ○ "Sand stays down on the ground."

### ***Acknowledge Feelings Before Setting Limits***

---

In order for children to see adult guidance as supportive, it is important for them to know that their feelings are recognized and understood. By acknowledging the child's feelings, before setting the limit, they will be less likely to respond in a negative way. For example:

- "You look angry. I cannot let you hit Scott."
- "It's hard to wait for your turn. The rule is that we line up for the slide."

## ***Redirection***

---

Redirecting children means changing the situation that is contributing to inappropriate behaviour. This can be an effective strategy with toddlers or young preschoolers. Offering a substitute toy or engaging them in some other activity may quickly resolve problems or conflicts. Redirected children towards activities that meet their needs. For example:

- “I can see you have a lot of energy today. Let’s get our coats and go outside.”

As children mature, offer problem solving methods to help them learn problem solving skills.

## ***Offer Appropriate Choices***

---

Adults can offer a simple choice when clarifying expectations or reinforcing limits. The choice should be said in a positive and supportive way. For example:

- “You can sit at the circle, or you can choose a quiet activity like a puzzle.” “You decide.”
- “Do you want to wait in line for your turn, or do you want to find something else to do?”

## ***Use Natural and Logical Consequences***

A statement of natural consequences clarifies the inevitable or unavoidable outcome of a behaviour. For example:

- “When you forget to put your art away, it’s hard to find it when it’s time to go home.”

A statement of logical consequence can help the child understand the problem and the solution. For example:

- “I can see that the paint spilled. Here is a sponge for wiping it up.”

## ***Limit the Use of Toys/Equipment***

---

Redirecting often goes hand in hand when it is necessary to set firmer limits or remove an item play options. This strategy should be used sparingly and only when other strategies (i.e. reminders, proximity or choices) have been unsuccessful. For example:

- “Since you are still having a hard time playing gently on the piano, I’m going to close it now.”
- “The climber is ‘off limits’ now because people are not using it safely.”

## ***Model Problem-Solving Skills***

---

When children face discouraging or frustrating situations, it is natural for them to react and get upset. Adults can offer verbal and/or physical help to model problem solving approaches and a positive and supportive environment. For example:

- A starting point in teaching coping skills is to acknowledge the problem.
  - “Tim has the bike, and you want to use it.”

Following a statement of the problem, it may be appropriate to ask guiding questions.

- “Have you asked Tim to give you the bike when he’s finished?”
- If further guidance is needed, state a solution or physically demonstrate.
  - “Tell Tim that you would like to use the bike when he is finished.”

When a situation has been resolved, it is helpful to summarize the problem solving approach for the child.

- “Next time, you want to use the bike, you can try to remember to ask to have a turn.”

Whether the problem relates to playing with toys or interacting with others, modelling problem-solving methods shows children different ways to overcome obstacles. As children grow and become more experienced, they can be encouraged to find solutions of their own.

## ***Provide Opportunities for Children to Make Amends***

---

Rather than demand a superficial apology, adults should offer genuine opportunities for children to restore relationships after an incident of hurt or harm. While children may not be immediately ready to participate in these opportunities, they should be suggested nonetheless. Ultimately, the goal of this strategy is to help children learn that making amends requires time and goodwill, rather than revenge. For example:

- “Can you help by getting Michael a tissue while I get a band-aid. No? Maybe you can sit quietly with Michael until he feels a little better.”
- “Sharon doesn’t feel ready to play yet, because she’s still upset. Let’s give her a little time alone.”

## D. Challenging Behaviours

### ***Redirection***

---

Redirection strategies can be effective for all ages of children. Time away is a redirection strategy for caregivers to direct a child away from an over stimulating activity or environment to a more calming area. Time away should not be a “timed activity” (i.e. the child sits on a chair for 5 minutes); time away it is not a punishment - but rather an opportunity for the child to develop self-regulation and regain control of their emotional and physical state. This strategy invites the child to return back to the previous activity when they have decided they are ready to. Children learn self-regulation when they feel encouraged, when they feel they belong and are valued, and when they feel they have control in their lives.

As children mature, this strategy enables them to recognize their emotions and behaviours. Children can learn to redirect themselves away from an activity or environment before inappropriate behaviours occur or escalate. Redirection/time away environments could be anywhere that a child can begin to “feel good, calm and in control” again, while still being supervised. For example:

- An area with pillows, blankets, books, soft stuffed toys and squeezable stress balls.
- An area with self-calming sensory items such as containers filled with foam chips and cotton balls, different feeling fabrics squares or bubble wrap, glitter/liquid filled bottles, kaleidoscope or an hourglass.
- A music area with soothing gentle sounds of nature (i.e. wind, whale sounds, birds etc.)

### ***Holding/restraint***

---

Holding or restraining a child is a serious issue and must only be used as a last resort; after all other strategies and techniques have been unsuccessful. It may be necessary to protect a child by using a restraint if a child has lost self-control, placing themselves or others at risk of imminent serious physical harm. A restraint of this nature would be considered an *emergency restraint*. The [Child Care Licensing Regulation](#) defines an emergency restraint as “a restraint that is necessary to protect the child or others from imminent serious physical harm that is not approved and documented in a child's care plan”. Caregivers are required

to report the use of an emergency restraint to the Medical Health Officer within 24 hours. [see Child Care Licensing Regulation sections 51, 52, 55, and schedule H.]

There may be children who have care plans with specific strategies and techniques developed specially for that child. If a child has a care plan that includes instructions respecting restraints as a behavioural guidance strategy, the caregiver must ensure that the restraints are administered only by a person who is trained in the use of, and alternatives to the use of, restraints. [see care plan requirements in sections 51 and 58 of the Child Care Licensing Regulation].

Adults and children can benefit from a debrief after a restraint has been used, to understand the reasons for the restraint, why alternatives strategies and techniques were unsuccessful and if an assessment of the child or reassessment of the child's care plan is needed to prevent a repeat occurrence.

## Summary

In most instances of guidance, adults will need to combine approaches or use a variety of strategies as they respond to children's behaviour. It is important to remember that no one strategy will work in every situation, or with every child. At different levels of development, strategies must vary. However, the more options for guidance that caregivers have to choose from, the more successful they will be in meeting the challenge of living and working with young children.



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/mental-health-matters/social-and-emotional-learning/anger/explaining-self-regulation>

## A Quick Guide

**Keep rules simple and easy to understand.** Repeat the rules often.

**Say what you mean.** Choose your words carefully and keep sentences short and simple. Focus on *what you want children to do* rather than what not to do.

**Give clear, simple choices.** Give children a choice only when there is a choice.

**Show respect.** Look children in the eyes, and talk with them, rather than “at” them. Talk to children about inappropriate behavior in private, rather than in front of others. Remind them of the reasons for rules, and discuss what they can do differently.

**Encourage.** Tell children what they’re doing right, use praise as a teaching tool, and let them know why you are proud of them. Give positive attention for good behavior rather than negative attention for inappropriate behavior.

**Teach children how to resolve conflict and solve problems.** Help children recognize and name feelings, identify problems, and come up with ideas for solving the problem, and try possible solutions.

**Teach children how to correct their behavior.** If a child draws on the wall, give her a wet cloth to clean the wall. Even if the child cannot successfully clean up the entire mess alone, participating in clean-up teaches her that actions have consequences. Over time, experiencing natural and logical consequences helps children learn self-regulation.

**Set a good example.** Children watch you all the time. They see how you talk to other children and adults. They see how you cope with anger or frustration. They watch how you deal with sadness and joy. They listen to how you say “I’m sorry.” The way you handle the ups and downs of life teaches children a lot about how to behave and get along with others.

*Modified from <http://articles.extension.org/pages/25703/basic-tips-child-care-providers-can-use-to-guide-childrens-behavior>*

---