Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):
Basic Child Behavior Management Concepts

Here are some ideas that may be useful to you as a parent of a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). As you learn consistent patterns of reacting to your child’s behaviors, the child’s behavior will change. (These tips can also be used with any child.)

Positive reinforcement
Praise and reward, called “positive reinforcement,” are the best ways to help children change or improve their behaviors. When a behavior is regularly followed by a positive response, the behavior is likely to be repeated. Without being aware of it, parents often tend to ignore good behavior and react only to behavior that is out of line. This may tend to increase bad behavior because, for many children, even negative attention is better than none at all.

So, what you need to do is “catch the child being good” and reward that behavior – with your attention, a smile or a compliment. At first, reward the behavior every time. Once the behavior is well established, occasional reinforcement will be fine.

Special playtime techniques
One way to pay attention and reward your child’s “good” behavior is to give your child 20 minutes of special playtime with you each day. During this special time, you should give no commands and ask no questions. Simply observe and play with the child, saying positive things like, “gee, it’s fun to play like this together,” or “what a neat story,” etc. Ignore minor misbehaviors during this time, focusing only on the child’s positive behaviors. Remember that ADHD children are less likely to be able to keep the future reward in mind.

Token reinforcement systems
As noted earlier, it’s always better to reward good behaviors than to punish negative behaviors. A positive token system can be set up in which the child receives a token or star for each targeted behavior (such as handing in all homework).

Choose one or two desired behaviors that are specific and clear to both you and your child. Every time the child performs the desired behavior (such as handing in homework, being in bed by 9 p.m.), he or she gets a token. Later, tokens can be redeemed for a reward. A particularly bad behavior (staying out until midnight) might result in a removal of tokens.

This technique is often used in schools, but can work well at home, too. All of these techniques should be used consistently, and with the child’s full understanding. If used properly, they can be very useful in teaching the child self-control and lessening conflict.

Important do’s and don’ts
• Do catch your child being good.
• Do praise or reward good behavior as soon as possible when noticed. Responding right away is very important for children with ADHD.
• Do get to know what consequences seem to work best for your child.
• Do give your child choices.
• Do clearly explain what you expect and what the consequences will be if the child does not behave in the expected way.
• Do think about and plan for times that will likely be overstimulating for your child (parties, long ceremonies, etc.).
• Do give yourself a timeout or a restful break often so that you can stay objective and keep your energy up.
• Don’t give long punishments, such as two-week groundings, because it may be too hard to follow through with them. Brief punishments, like one day inside or no TV, usually work just as well.
• Don’t yell or repeat yourself: “How many times do I have to tell you?” Your child will tune you out. Actions will work better than words.
• Don’t give up. All of the techniques you are learning now will pay off later.

Continued
**Timing**

Praise or reward for a good behavior should occur right after the behavior at first. For younger children, this may be verbal praise plus a “token,” such as a star or point on a good behavior chart. Older children can put off their reward until later (e.g., collect 10 stars or points to earn a good behavior reward).

**Negative consequences of punishment**

Why isn’t punishing a child a good idea? When a child’s behavior is followed by a negative parent response, such as yelling or grounding, the behavior may decrease at first, but will often return. Parents may feel angry and want to punish the child, but punishment should be used as a last resort and only when needed (such as after dangerous behaviors).

Try not to use punishment because:
- It further angers the child and may result in increased negative behaviors.
- Children may become sneaky or lie to prevent punishment.
- Children may become fearful of the parent.
- Physical punishment may cause the child to model aggressive behavior and become physically aggressive, taking it out on other children.
- Punishment does not help teach the child what he or she should be doing (only what not to do).

**Time out**

There are times when a child’s bad behavior can’t be safely ignored (such as when a child hits his sibling or deliberately breaks a toy). At these times, the child should be placed in a designated chair or room for a brief period to calm down and reflect.

A good rule of thumb is to use one minute of timeout for each year of the child’s age (a 7-year-old gets seven minutes). Time-outs do not need to be long to be effective. When the child returns, there is no more scolding. The child is given a “fresh start” to behave cooperatively. After the timeout technique is set, you can give the child warning cues, such as counting aloud to three when the child is behaving badly. Counting to three allows the child to “escape” the timeout by stopping the negative behavior before you finish counting.

**Natural consequences**

Another technique to lessen negative behaviors is to require the child to make up for the damage he or she has done. For example, if a child has broken her brother’s crayons, she must replace them with her own or buy him new ones.

**Handling the morning routine**

Children with ADHD can be especially irritable in the morning and hard to get ready for school. To make the morning routine simpler:
- Do not allow TV before getting dressed, finishing breakfast and having the school bag packed.
- For young children, lay out clothes the night before and have comb and brush ready next to the sink. A colorful poster picturing the morning routine can help. Have a marker tied to the poster and let the child check off each item as it is done.
- Sometimes, you may need to give strong “natural consequences.” For example, if your child has refused to get dressed and it’s time to leave for school, you can put the clothes in a bag and let the child change from pajamas to clothes in the car or in the restroom at school. This type of natural consequence usually is needed only once.

**Going out in public**

Many parents feel they “lose control” of their children when out in public. Children with ADHD may run off, touch things they shouldn’t or throw a tantrum if told “no.”

Stores are a special challenge. Try to cue the child right before going in the store. Explain that the child needs to hold your hand or stay within your sight, and that he or she will receive a small reward at checkout (such as a pack of gum) if they comply. If not, there will be no reward and the child will be taken out of the store by the count of three.

If the child misbehaves, you may need to follow through and leave the store to show the child you mean business. A hand signal can be set up as a cue (meaning “pay attention” or “remember our plan”). You can use the hand signal in public so that neither you nor the child is embarrassed by yelling or being scolded.
Charting
A first step in changing a problem behavior is to chart how often and when it occurs (like hitting a sibling or throwing toys around the room) before trying any kind of behavior modification. Charting can help you see the “high risk” times when the behavior is most likely to occur. You can then try to redirect the child at those times.

The child is also given a chance to work on improving certain behaviors in a reward chart. This generally works best for children in the 4-to-8-year-old range, which is often the time of first diagnosis with ADHD.

The therapist, child and parent can prepare a “good behavior chart” like the one below. Using this chart, a child could earn six stars per day. The parent is advised never to remove a star once earned. However, the child may not earn a star in the box if he or she has behaved badly.

A certain number of stars specified by the parent ahead of time, will earn a reward. The idea is to motivate the child to focus on desirable behaviors and to get credit for “doing it right.” Reward charts can become more complex with different token rewards for older children.

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