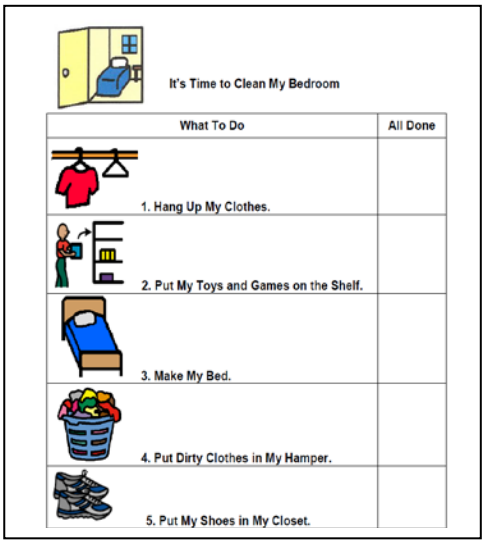
Getting Your Child's Behavior in Shape at Home Using Positive Behavior Support (PBS)

Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is an approach for developing an understanding of why the child has challenging behavior. Positive behavior support does *not* mean changing the child. Rather, it means creating a new environment that supports the positive behavior you want to achieve. It means creating a plan that determines who will help and what you will do differently.

Through you may have heard about PBS at your child's school, PBS is not just for use at school. Parents can use the same ideas to create a better environment for the entire family. Using PBS at home involves (1.) deciding what behavior you want to change; (2.) developing a theory about why you think the behavior is occurring; (3.) deciding how you want that behavior to change (what your expectations are and what success will "look like"); (4.) using all of this information to select supports that have been proven to work (such as teaching new skills to get the same results, changing environments and daily routines, and rewarding positive behaviors); and (5.) *consistently* implementing the supports you have selected. The following tips can help parents use positive behavioral support techniques at home.

The First Step: Making Expectations Clear

Often we assume the child just knows what we want them to do and understands it the same way we do. If they do not meet our expectation, then we assume it's because they are making the "choice" not to behave. Think of the example of asking your child to clean his bedroom. You politely ask the child to "straighten up his room" and provide him with plenty of time to do it. When you return to check his progress, you notice that he has unceremoniously stuffed all of his clothes (both dirty and clean) into his drawers, left several games and action figures laying on the ground, and forgotten to make his bed. This is NOT your idea of a clean bedroom. But is this *your child's* idea of what it means to "straighten up" his room? Is his idea of a "clean room" and your idea of a "clean room" the same? For that matter, is your idea and your spouse's idea of "cleaning up" the same? Or are there some differences in expectations?



If there is a possibility that our expectations are not crystal clear to the child, then our first step in getting the room cleaned *to our satisfaction* is not offering a rewards or threatening punishments to get it clean, but clarifying our expectations of exactly what we want the child to do and clearly communicating this. A visual checklist (*see example right*) is often a helpful way of getting your point across. This is especially important for children who may have processing issues and/or difficulties with attention and focus.

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Visual "checklists" like these can be developed to capture several independent tasks that need to be completed (e.g., "my chore list") or to break down a job into smaller, discrete steps (e.g., steps to clean up my bedroom).

Expectations about several different chores that you want to be your child's responsibility (and that you would like the child to be more responsible about remembering) can also be clearly communicated with a visual support and even made more visually appealing using items found at your local craft store (*see examples left*).

Remember That All Behavior is Communication

Children often misbehave because they are trying to tell us something or communicate some need. Many times with younger children, they want our attention and the only way they can think of to get it is to misbehave. How many times have you been in the grocery store behind a mother who is asking her child the following questions: Do you want a spanking? Do you want me to take you out to the car? Do you want me to tell your father when we get home? Children cry, grab, scream and beg because they want to communicate something to you. The only way to change this habit is to teach them what we call "replacement behaviors". These are new behaviors that are socially acceptable. The only way to teach these behaviors is to model and practice them.

Practice Makes Perfect

With younger children, practice sessions can be an important part of clarifying your expectations and teaching them better, more appropriate ways of getting their point across ("communicating"). Children might find it fun to participate in a "reverse" practice session in which you and your child switch roles to practice communicating wants/needs using socially acceptable replacement behaviors. To begin, tell the child ahead of time that you are going to practice asking for things and learning the difference between yes and no. Tell your child this is going to be fun because s/he gets to be the parent for a little while. Walk through the cereal aisle at the grocery store and try the following procedure:

- Pick up a box of cereal that has a toy in that you want.
- Walk over to your child and say, "I'd really like to have this cereal this week because it has a CD game of Monopoly in the box."
- I promise I will eat this cereal even if it tastes horrible, because I really want the game.

Tell your child ahead of time to tell you "No" to whatever you ask for. Then when your child tells you "no," ask him or her for a reason. Model appropriate behavior by calming accepting his or her reason and putting the cereal on the shelf.

Then have your child do the same thing back to you. Have him or her choose a box of cereal that has a toy in it wants. Have him or her tell you they would like the cereal because of the toy. Have him or her promise he or she will eat the cereal no matter what. Then tell him or her no. Have him or her ask you for a reason and then give one. When they accept your reason praise him or her for following directions. Practice this several times and then practice it several more time during subsequent trips to various stores with various items. On the same days that you practice saying "no," also practice saying "yes." Have him or her model saying "thank you" and then compliment him or her on his or her manners. You will need to model this the same way you did for the "no" model.

It isn't a miracle, and it isn't going to happen over night. But soon, you will start to see a difference when you tell your child "no." It is fair for him or her to understand why you said, "no," so explaining your reason is reasonable. Your children will also respect you for not using the "I'm the mommy that's why," and you will respect him or her for using good manners by accepting your reason. Be honest in your reason. "It's too expensive." "It's not good for you." "I don't have the money this week," are all good responses.

Recognize Success—Often!

On average children typically comply with the rules much of the time. But how often are they complimented for their behavior or even told that they met your expectation? It's important to remember to recognize successes frequently. One way to acknowledge when the child follows the rules and meets your expectations is to give very specific, verbal feedback ("Nice job cleaning up—you got all the clothes in the drawers or in your hamper"). Another important part about giving behavioral feedback is "catching him being good" with a high enough frequency. The goal is to aim for a ratio of positive to negative interactions of at least 4 to 1—this means that for every 1 time you give corrective feedback ("That's not what I meant by pick up your clothes, they need to go into the hamper if they're dirty"), you also try to tell the child about 4 things he did well ("Thanks for clearing your breakfast dishes"). Try to recognize effort and progress by praising *small* successes, too.

Setting Limits Effectively

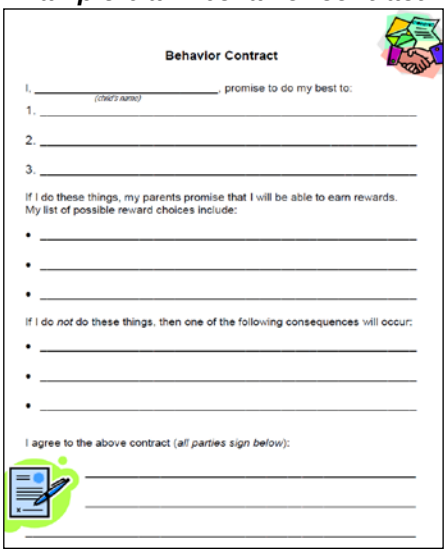
Another idea is to practice setting, firm, but fair limits with your child. Setting limits does not have to be done in an angry, rude or hostile way. Firmness does not mean intimidation. In other words, say what you mean; mean what you say, but don't be mean when you say it. For example, when you enter a store remind your child that you have "X" dollars to spend and that anything they want to add will go over the limit which might take away from something else they want (going to the movies). Give your child $5 or whatever limit you want to set. Tell your child he or she may ask for something but he or she will have to be able to purchase it with the money that you have set aside for extras. If your child wants a certain cereal, then he or she will have to pay for it.

When setting limits with your child, try to ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I tell my child in advance what behavior I want?
- Did I make any "deadlines" clear?
- Was my expectation or the "rule" I wanted them to follow clear? For example, "Clean your room," might not mean the same thing to an adult as it does to a child.

- Did I ask a *question* instead of making a *statement* (i.e., saying “will you clean up now?”, rather than “it’s time to clean up now”)? A child might think it is OK to say “no” to ‘Will you pick up your things?”
- If I can’t seem to get the “good” behavior, have I tried breaking it into smaller steps and rewarding success at those?
- Have I tried helping the child remember by using signals or cues?
- Have I tried letting him see someone else perform the desired behavior?
- Did I tell my child in advance what the consequences of his actions would be (both positive things and “negative” or non-preferred consequences)? A behavior contract (*see example right*) can help with clarifying these criteria.
- Did I make the good (expected) behavior pay off?
- Was the “payoff” something the child liked?
- Did I make the “bad” behavior cost?
- Was the “cost” really something the child didn’t like?
- Did I give the “payoff” or the “cost” immediately after the behavior happened?
- Could I be getting “bad” behavior because I have let the same behavior “pay off” in the past?
- Am I giving up too soon?

Example blank behavior contract:



Behavior Contract

I, _____ (child's name), promise to do my best to:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

If I do these things, my parents promise that I will be able to earn rewards. My list of possible reward choices include:

- _____
- _____
- _____

If I do *not* do these things, then one of the following consequences will occur:

- _____
- _____
- _____

I agree to the above contract (*all parties sign below*):

_____

_____

_____

Final Thought: The Magic of Consistency

The most important lesson is about consistency and practice, practice, practice. Remember that for every 1 year that a behavior has been in place it takes 1 month of consistent intervention to see a major decrease in the behaviors. If the intervention is not implemented consistently, it will take longer to work. If you say “no” and give a reason, then don’t give in if further begging ensues. This only tells the child that you have a breaking point and to keep trying. If you’ve said “no” and given a reason, then you should not say “no” again or give *another* reason. Try to be as good as your word. Then when your child accepts your answer and your reason, don’t forget to compliment him or her on this good behavior.

It's Time to Clean My Bedroom

What To Do	All Done
 1. Hang Up My Clothes.	
 2. Put My Toys and Games on the Shelf.	
 3. Make My Bed.	
 4. Put Dirty Clothes in My Hamper.	
 5. Put My Shoes in My Closet.	


Kyle
To Do
Done
Olivia
To Do
Done

Behavior Contract

I, _____, promise to do my best to:
(child's name)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

If I do these things, my parents promise that I will be able to earn rewards. My list of possible reward choices include:

- _____
- _____
- _____

If I do *not* do these things, then one of the following consequences will occur:

- _____
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I agree to the above contract (*all parties sign below*):

_____

_____

_____