

Eight questions all teachers ask about guidance

Whenever teachers, directors, and adult educators gather, the conversation inevitably turns to classroom management—the best ways to guide children to developmentally appropriate self-regulation. Too often, creative and energetic teachers leave their careers citing the stress of having to deal with the daily barrage of behavior problems.

As an alternative to giving up the job you love, get a handle on guidance and find the freedom to share your enthusiasm and encourage children's curiosity and discovery.

How do I get children to listen to me?

What are you trying to say, and how are you saying it? Different situations require unique styles of communication. We listen differently to what is new or unfamiliar and tend to ignore what is routine and expected. For example, when the sky is gray and the wind is blowing, we pay attention to the weather

forecast. But when one hot summer day follows another, we ignore the daily repetition of "The high today will be near 100, and the low tonight in the mid 70s."

Similarly, if children constantly hear the loud commands "No" or "Stop," they will likely tune you out. It's not that the children aren't listening—they've just heard it all before. You aren't providing any new information. Instead, be direct and specific about the behavioral misstep and offer an alternative behavior. For example: "Kicking Jenny to get her attention is not OK, it hurts. Tap her shoulder instead." If children learn that you can respond to their interests and needs, they will be eager for the new information you'll share.

When you give information, offer it once and follow through. For example, when you tell children that it's time to wash hands for lunch and Lizzie continues with her doll play, avoid saying, "Lizzie, how many times do I have to tell you...?" Instead, go to Lizzie and guide her with a gentle hand on her back to place the doll in its bed and on to the sink. Avoid repeating yourself.

If you've identified a consequence to an unacceptable behavior, impose the consequence with minimal drama. Assume, for example, that you say, "Brandon, if you put the peg in your mouth again, it will need to go into the wash bucket and you'll need to choose a different center." Then follow through. Help Brandon put the peg into the bucket of toys to be sanitized and guide him to a new activity. Again, avoid drama and a lecture; just do what you promised.

Vary your expression, tone of voice, and conversational style according to the activity of the moment. Greet children enthusiastically, but do not overwhelm them. Calm a loud group by speaking softly. Kneel or stoop to children's eye level and use a normal, conversational tone when you're sharing information

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about an activity. Avoid barking commands and shouting across distances unless there is an immediate and genuine emergency.

Learn and model problem-solving techniques, and use them routinely. Soon children won't need your intervention in every squabble.

Children want and need meaningful contact with adults. Once you establish trust, the children will be eager to listen.

What's the easiest way to make classroom rules?

Children younger than 3 years need your constant attention and guidance. Observe, reflect, and plan: You will learn to anticipate their needs, distract or redirect them to appropriate activities, and arrange the environment to make the most of their interactions.

Older children need the same things from you but are ready to take some responsibility for their own behavior and learning choices. For children old enough to understand the concept of a rule, there are a few basics.

Most early childhood teachers agree that the only necessary rules involve the safety of children and the environment. For example, Ms. Matthews' kindergarten class has three rules posted on the classroom wall:

1. We take care of ourselves.
2. We take care of each other.
3. We take care of our classroom.

Having too many classroom rules is confusing, hard to remember, and almost impossible to enforce.

In Ms. Matthews' classroom, almost all classroom issues can be handled with these three simple directions. They are the baseline for problem-solving and imposed consequences for hitting others, cutting hair, washing paintbrushes, and even tattling. Help children learn—by your words and example—that the Golden Rule is always worth following.

ANTICIPATING A CHILD'S NEEDS CAN HELP PREVENT TANTRUMS.

Experienced teachers maintain a tight structure early in the year while children are learning classroom routines and each other. Keep to your schedule, maintain the space arrangement, label storage areas for toys and materials, and respond quickly and consistently to problems. This sets the tone for the young learning community. It helps children know that you are in control and are an adult who is fair, caring, responsive, and worthy of trust.

How do I help an out-of-control child?

Children who are out of control—having a tantrum, for example—need two things: their own physical safety and the knowledge that an adult is in control. Tantrums are often an extreme cry for help from children who don't have the skills to deal with a particular situation. Fatigue, frustration, fear, or immature self-regulation skills can provoke tantrums.

Anticipating a child's needs can help prevent tantrums. If a tantrum does occur, however, protect the child from physical harm. You may need to use gentle but firm direction to keep the child from head banging, biting, or throwing equipment. Most children will respond to your hands on their shoulders or arms and your face at their eye level.

While holding the child's shoulder, repeat quietly, "I'll hold you until you are calm and able to manage your body." When the child stops thrashing, loosen your restraint gradually. Expect the child to continue crying to release tension. Tell the child that you are there to keep everyone from being hurt. When you've given the child enough time to cool off—

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breathing is regular and shallow—stay near. When the child is under control again, invite a conversation that explores alternative ways of behaving.

Beware of habitual tantrums. Unfortunately, some children learn that even threatening a tantrum embarrasses and panics adults. Rather than risk a tantrum, adults reinforce a negative behavior and lose an opportunity to teach more acceptable social skills. Soon the child learns that the easiest way to get attention is to fall on the floor screaming.

Breaking a tantrum habit requires an action plan that you and the child's parents agree to implement consistently. Carefully review the needs and developmental skills of the child. All children need to learn that they get more and better attention for positive behaviors. Many will modify their inappropriate behavior when they are ignored.

Assuming there is no danger of physical injury, deliberately turn your attention away from the child to some exciting classroom discovery. When children learn that tantrums don't get the desired reward—your attention and capitulation to their desire—they usually choose to participate in more productive classroom activities.

How do I get children to share?

Your expectations need to match the child's developmental skills in all domains. Recognizing what children need and what they are actually able to do will help you anticipate problems and help children resolve them.

Before learning to share, infants and toddlers have to learn that objects that they see and touch are not extensions of themselves. Developmentally, they cannot understand that the balls they are holding could be attractive and desirable to other children. The concept of sharing a ball is just as foreign as sharing an arm or a foot. When children learn to see themselves as unique, autonomous beings—at around 2 years—they can begin to slowly understand that others have interests and needs similar to their own.

As children develop social skills, they will gradually be able to put off satisfying their own needs—delaying gratification—for increasingly longer periods of time. The trick for teachers is the ability to recognize each child's stage of development and to know how long that child can wait for a turn before striking out or otherwise expressing an urgent need.

Experts recommend having duplicates of favorite

classroom toys and materials to minimize fights over the same desirable object. Because sharing, by definition, is a voluntary distribution of resources, forced sharing is not sharing at all. Instead it's a teacher's ability to control a child's behavior and interests. Providing duplicates respects children's developmental skills and reinforces their emerging abilities to make choices and to explore independently, according to their own needs.

BEWARE OF HABITUAL TANTRUMS.

However, there are certain things particular children won't and shouldn't share, such as a lovey or a pacifier. Part of learning social skills involves respecting another's property. We learn that sharing is a freely offered invitation to participate in an activity: "Would you like some of my sandwich?" or "I would like to play with the red blocks, but you can use the blue and yellow ones," for example. Sharing does not give others free access to personal property; that's what adults call stealing. Both sharing and stealing are concepts children learn from the words and examples of adults.

Older preschoolers and school-age children can practice sharing if you offer the opportunity. Taking turns, active problem-solving activities, and cooperative projects teach the sharing skills that children will need as they assume more autonomy and independence.

What's wrong with using stickers?

Rewards are either extrinsic or intrinsic. An intrinsic reward comes from within—a feeling of pride, satisfaction, and accomplishment when you know you've done something well. In contrast, an extrinsic reward, like a sticker or special privilege, comes from the outside—someone else telling you that you have succeeded, like "Good work" or "Your artwork won the \$5 prize." What you feel inside is the real measure of self-worth and the force that encourages perseverance and the quest for success.

Stickers are external motivators. They tell children when and if *you* feel they did a good job. They don't reflect how hard a child worked, whether the job is an important one, or even how the child feels about the job accomplished. Unfortunately, stickers often become meaningless decorations awarded for eating meals, napping, using the toilet, or even "playing nice." These are all tasks or obligations that children need to learn to regulate for themselves. Handing out stickers keeps you in control and doesn't help children grow into competent, self-motivated, and emotionally regulated adults.

What do I do when my guidance techniques don't match a parent's methods?

Teachers in early care and education programs are in a delicate partnership with the parents of the children with whom they work. Sometimes classroom guidance techniques are unfamiliar to parents and occasionally conflict with the family's style and practice.

Basic guidance methods work equally well at home and in the classroom. Using words rather than fists, for example, helps children express themselves without violence or threat in any situation. Difficulty does arise, however, when a parent is a strong advocate of physical punishment and encourages you to "Forget the talk, just swat him."

While maintaining respect for the parent, be clear that you will not violate licensing laws or professional ethics that prohibit physical punishment.

First, work to build a trusting relationship with families. Invite them to observe the class in action, and invite conversations to discuss developmentally appropriate expectations and the techniques you use. Often people rely on old habits and familiar routines rather than looking for techniques that are easier to implement, are more effective, and have better long-term outcomes.

At certain times of the day everything seems to fall apart. What am I doing wrong?

Check how you handle transitions. These are stressful times when you move from one activity or task to another. Some examples are moving from free play to a group activity, from the indoor classroom to outdoors, from lunch to teeth brushing to nap, and from the classroom to going home. These times lack structure and sometimes invite behavioral missteps.

Reducing the number of large group transitions will decrease the potential for disruptions. The guideline typically cited is the younger the child, the fewer the transitions.

You can often smooth transitions times by following a routine, preparing for the unexpected, minimizing waiting time, and setting clear and consistent behavioral expectations for the children. A daily schedule helps children anticipate transitions. Because preschool children don't have the cognitive skills to understand time or use clocks, review the day's activities using a chart, a picture album, or time line, and offer as much detail as the group needs. Mark unusual days—rainy days or field trips, for example—with special emphasis.

Warn children of impending change. To children younger than 3 years, give warnings with a single, simple statement, "It's almost time to start cleaning up." Older children can follow more complex, two- or three-step directions such as, "When the gong sounds, it will be time to go to lunch. Please finish what you're doing, put your materials away, and meet me by the door." These alerts help children learn to pace themselves and offer a sense of self-control. Rushing from task to task, on the other hand, can make anyone feel frazzled.

Because young children find it difficult, if not impossible, to "wait quietly," keep a file of activities, songs, and finger plays ready for inevitable lines to use the toilet, a delayed lunch, or a wait for a late

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parent. Avoid unnatural and meaningless directions like “Line up at the door, boys on the right and girls on the left,” that are never required in adult life and that prolong the transition time. Instead, talk about and model the courtesy, respect, and attentiveness that characterize social harmony.

How do I help children develop respect for adults, each other, and themselves?

Look at yourself through a magnifying mirror and see yourself as children see you. Evaluate how you talk to and about other people. Look at how you treat parents, children, and coworkers. For example, do you ridicule someone’s beliefs or mannerisms?

Think about how you use materials. Do you expect children to put away toys while ignoring dirty coffee cups and laughing at recycling efforts?

responded by abandoning their hope for respect from children or their parents. Fortunately, many others feel that respect can be earned by consistently behaving in ways that demonstrate compassion, trust, honesty, patience, wisdom, and fairness.

In the classroom, respect is usually two-way: It moves from you to the children and the children back to you. Children perceive your respect when you listen to their ideas and concerns, and watch you respond to their needs. Endeavor to routinely communicate your respect for children as human beings whom you believe can learn to share basic values like responsibility, pride, and helpfulness. When values like respect are important to you, you will naturally teach—through your behavior and your words—how others like to be treated. ■

MODEL THE COURTESY, RESPECT, AND ATTENTIVENESS THAT CHARACTERIZE SOCIAL HARMONY.

Consider how you solve problems. Do you ignore a problem, complain about it, wait for someone else to solve it, or blame it on someone else? Or do you try to figure out exactly what’s going on, seek needed help, and evaluate solutions? Your behaviors and interactions are magnified for children to mimic and internalize. They make what you do part of their own way of behaving.

Respect is sometimes earned and sometimes offered. People you admire and appreciate for their behavior earn your respect. But sometimes you award respect to people because of their membership in certain groups—religious clergy, elders, employers, or doctors, for example.

Our society no longer agrees about which groups deserve respect. Instead, we tend to look at individuals within groups. At the neighborhood health clinic, for example, we respect Sally, the registered nurse, but are less willing to offer the same deference to the custodial staff or receptionist.

Teachers have felt this shift and have sometimes