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## BACK TO BASICS

# Child guidance: School-agers

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By about age 6, children have the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills to think consciously about the choices they make. Most are able to consider cause and effect, weigh consequences, and regulate their behavior much of the time. They are generally eager to live up to others' expectations and gain approval. For this age group, fairness is paramount; consistency is essential. As adults continue to support and guide school-agers, the goal is to help the children develop a sense of competence in their own skills, including behavioral self-regulation.

### Use positive guidance

- Model *mutual* respect. This means having faith in each other's abilities rather than believing that children must be humiliated and manipulated to improve behavioral choices. Help create an atmosphere of mutual regard and perspective taking—walk in each other's shoes. One way to model this respect is by giving children an appropriate warning before activities change to allow them to finish a task on their own time.
- Offer *encouragement*, not praise. Ask children to evaluate their own work: "What do you think?" rather than "You did a good job; I'm proud." Focus on the process, not the product: "You seem to really enjoy making and using puppets. Are there other materials you can imagine using for the hair?" rather than "Hurry to make the last puppet so we can have the show." Acknowledge the task, not the child's innate ability or worth: "Thanks for helping Hannah wipe up the water" rather than "You're such a kind person for helping out."
- Talk *with* children about behavior missteps in private. Correcting Julie in front of her friends can be humiliating. It can also provide the negative attention she's craving. Start the conversation by sharing your own experience in dealing with the same behavior as a child.



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

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- In a conflict, offer a cooling-off period with water, clay, or a favorite book. After the child is calm, ask: “Can you describe what happened?” “How did you feel?” “What could you do differently next time?”

## Use large group time for community building

- Discuss a topic like mutual respect or cooperation. Ask questions like “Why is it respectful to listen while another person is talking?” Listen carefully when children share their personal examples or those from books or stories. Use the children’s anecdotes to construct new discussion topics.
- Involve children in making the classroom rules. Keep rules short and simple, and make sure you share the reason behind every rule. Write down the rules and post them. Review the rules periodically and modify them as the children’s self-regulation skills increase.
- Involve children in setting logical consequences to behavioral missteps. Ask, “What should happen when the soccer balls are kicked over the fence?” Let children practice on hypothetical situations to avoid blame or criticism. Help children evaluate the consequences by making sure it’s related to the misstep, and it’s reasonable and respectful to the child.

- Choose the solution that seems best, and try it.
  - After a few days, evaluate the solution—again, with the children’s input. If the solution isn’t working, restart the problem-solving process and agree on another trial solution.
- Give children tools for handling anger. Between the ages of 5 and 8, children may still have difficulty seeing each other’s point of view. Let them know that conflicts are normal, even between friends. Encourage the children to talk about their frustrations directly; always anticipate and redirect physical expressions of anger. Introduce the children to effective ways to quell their anger—different tools will work with different children. For example, offer a jump rope, art materials, puppets, and construction bricks along with books, deep breathing exercises, yoga, and an intimate conversation with you. ■

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## INVOLVE CHILDREN IN MAKING THE CLASSROOM RULES.

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- Teach problem solving. Help children learn there’s more than one way to solve a problem, and that some solutions are better than others. Use this familiar process:
    - Define the problem—with input from the children. Note whether you’re on the same page—do you both consider it a problem? If the issue is between two children, make sure each child has an opportunity to express concerns and frustrations.
    - Brainstorm solutions.
    - Consider the possible outcomes of each proposed solution.