

Effective Teaching Strategies

As a teacher, you already have many of the skills to help children develop the strengths they need for success in school and in life. Let's begin by reviewing what you already know about how best to teach young children. In the chart below, list five or more typical discipline and guidance techniques in the left column.

TYPICAL DISCIPLINE AND GUIDANCE TECHNIQUES	TEACHING RHYMING WORDS

Now imagine for a moment that you have decided to teach the children in your group about rhyming words. For two or three weeks you have used many of the strategies that you know from experience will help children learn the concept of rhymes. You read poems and do finger plays. You read predictable rhyming books and play rhyming games. And after that time, most of the children in the class can tell you that *hat* rhymes with *cat*. But Bev and Jennifer are still in the dark. After another week of activities and songs, Bev catches on, but Jennifer still doesn't understand. In the column at the right, list at least five things you would do to help Jennifer.

Did your right column include most of the strategies you listed in the left column?

Probably not. As you look over the column on the left, you might notice that many of those strategies would not help a child learn a new skill such as rhyming. Those strategies might even discourage a child from learning at all! The reasons that you wouldn't use those techniques to teach Jennifer rhyming are the same reasons those techniques won't teach children appropriate social or emotional skills. They're not effective teaching strategies.

What Is an Effective Teaching Strategy?

Responding to troubling behavior is difficult, and we want that behavior to stop immediately. When individual children do things to hurt others or to disrupt the peace of the classroom, we sometimes feel like striking back and making that child "pay" for the pain and chaos they have created. We have the mistaken belief that making the child feel bad is the fastest road to making the child act good.

Years ago teachers tried to use many of those techniques to teach reading or math. When my mother was a child, teachers sat children in the corner with a dunce cap or they rapped a child across the knuckles with a ruler if they lagged in reading. We listen to those stories now and say "Tsk, tsk, how primitive." Yet when a child is struggling socially, we still have him wear a version of a dunce cap—only now we call the dunce chair a time-out chair and we have replaced the dunce cap with names written on the board. Our public, shaming techniques flaunt the child's social or emotional challenges to her peers and to anyone else who walks into the classroom.

Maybe you have tried your best to teach a child a certain social skill, but still the child repeats the undesirable behavior. What do you do then?

Think again about a literacy problem such as rhyming. What if you had taught the skill in all the ways you know how and the child still didn't get it? Most teachers say that they would refer the child out to find out if some developmental or organic problem was preventing the child from learning. And that is exactly what you should do for social or emotional issues as well. Once you have tried all the techniques you know, it's

time to tap into the wider circle of your professional support team for help. You assume something else might be going on with the child that another specialist might spot.

Punishment

“But what if I have taught the right behavior and I know they have learned it, and they still purposely misbehave? Isn’t punishment appropriate then?” Many, many teachers have questions like these. Let’s think about why children might not be using the skills we are pretty sure they have, and what might be effective to help them.

Have you ever made a New Year’s resolution? Have you ever kept one? You’re an adult, you’re highly motivated, you know exactly what you are supposed to do, and by Valentine’s Day you find yourself slipping back to old patterns. Think of a child who has learned at home to print his name in all uppercase letters. We invest a lot of time to teach children how to print their names in upper- and lowercase letters. Do they still print their names in all caps frequently? Many do. They know the new behavior, they know what is expected, and they are highly motivated to be successful. Yet they still revert back to old habits. The same happens with social and emotional skills. We can teach children how to stand in line and practice many times, but when they are excited or under stress, they go back to their old behavior of pushing and hitting. For all of us, it takes lots of practice to change old patterns until the new behavior becomes so automatic that it becomes part of who we are.

So often we teach the child a skill and immediately throw him back into the problem situation and expect him to “perform.” Maybe he is splashing others at the water table where we have used a kind but firm technique to teach that splashing others is out of bounds at school. The child seems to have clearly understood our guidance and has agreed to keep the others dry from now on. A minute later, there he is again, splashing his buddy. What is happening here?

Here is an example from an adult’s life experience: Imagine for a moment that your best friend is a recovering alcoholic, celebrating her third week sober. You have gone with her to a holiday party where alcohol is being served. Would you leave your best friend alone at the beckoning champagne table for half an hour while you make a phone call? When our friends or relatives are struggling to break an addiction or a sweet tooth, we stay sensitive to their vulnerability as they work to establish new habits. We support them in situations when temptation hovers. We surely don’t intentionally put temptation in their path.

Extend the same care and courtesy to the children in your care. When a child is struggling to learn not to push in line, have her be your partner so you can support her early attempts. If a child is learning to share toys, stay close by with him in the block area and at the water table. When a child is practicing the new skill of conflict

resolution, gently reinforce the process rather than sending the child back alone to "use your words." Don't expect more from a young child than you would expect from yourself or a loved one.

But won't punishing children help them to pay attention? Won't knowing there's a consequence for misbehavior motivate them to remember the behavior we have spent so much energy to teach them? Often this punishment debate is a sticky issue for adults. It seems to make sense to punish children or give them consequences for misbehavior now, since that is what we do later on in adult society. If adults speed, they get a speeding ticket. Shouldn't children learn now that bad behavior gets punished?

On the surface, it seems to make a lot of sense to give children consequences. After all, isn't it important for them to learn that if they continue challenging behavior as adults that they will get adult consequences?

Shift your thinking again to literacy. What are some of the consequences in the adult world for being functionally illiterate? Less income? Fewer choices about the kind of work you do? Lower standards of living? If functionally illiterate adults suffer those consequences, wouldn't it make sense to give negative consequences now to a child who never pays attention at book time? Should we give that child the old broken desk in the drafty dark corner of the classroom? Should we give the child half portions at lunch and explain, "Here you go. Illiterate people don't earn enough money for a lot of food. And no more desserts at school since only literate people can afford them."

Most teachers would read the above paragraph with horror that I even suggested such treatment of a child who is not interested in books. It seems absurd to punish a young child for not liking to read. It is just as crazy to punish children for being socially or emotionally illiterate. We should do everything in our power while these children are still young to give them skills so they can avoid having that kind of life later.

Punishing children doesn't help them to develop the strengths they'll need to thrive in today's world. Punishment, and other negative and hurtful strategies, do nothing to move children along the road to learning life skills. In fact, they knock children off the road to social and emotional competency. Teachers should do their best to teach children the skills they need and help children build the strengths they require for success in school and in life. Teachers who follow this path will be instrumental in guiding children to reach their social and emotional goals.

Rewards

Do we want to raise children who make behavior choices based on bribes and rewards? Do we want to motivate children to say "What will I get if I clean up the room?" or "How much will you pay me to get an 'A' in math?" Rewards and punishments are the flip side of the same coin. While a reward feels like a reward, lack of a reward feels like a punishment.

Rewards change behavior in the short term, but what is the long-term cost of using

such a strategy? Do we really want to raise kids who behave only when they think they will be rewarded?

Teachers are bigger than little kids and have a wealth of goodies, whether it is stickers, praise, recess, or tokens, that they can use to get their own way. As the adults in charge, teachers have the power to give or withhold the goodies. The downside of these techniques is that we are not modeling the kinds of behavior we want to see the children imitate. On the contrary, the use of rewards models the very behavior we want children to stop! Instead of helping children appreciate that success in life depends upon maintaining healthy relationships, we model for children the promise of bribes and the threat of pain to navigate relationships. How many times have you shuddered to hear such manipulations as "If you don't give me the bike, you can't come to my birthday party," or "If you give me the truck, I'll be your best friend." Where do you think children learned them?

Surely we don't want to begin modeling this kind of manipulation during a child's most vulnerable years. Instead, help children build their own internal motivations and moral compasses so they can make positive choices in life.

Blame or Moving Forward

Most of us respond to the finger of blame with excuses or rationalizations. Blame also goes hand in hand with an attempt by the blamer to somehow make the other pay for what they did. Instead, an approach of defining and solving problems is based on making a better future.

Problem solving may involve making amends or fixing what went wrong. It may involve looking at the original source of the problem and developing strategies to prevent the problem from happening again in the future. While the focus of blame is to punish and look to the past, a focus on problem solving is to plan for a better future.

There is a difference between consequences, which are designed to have children pay for a misdemeanor, and making amends, which is designed to help repair an error or an injury. Making amends is a life skill, and an important lesson for children is "If you've messed it up, it becomes your responsibility to fix it up." When adults do something inappropriate, the social expectation is that they will make the situation right. If a child knocks over paint while running through the classroom, having her sit in a time-out chair isn't as effective as helping her take responsibility for the mess she created.

What amends can you think of for a child who has knocked paint off the shelf? If you are having trouble thinking of something, try to picture a staff room where a teacher has knocked paint off the shelf. What kind of behavior would we hope to see from an adult? Perhaps we would expect them to clean it up. Maybe if it is a special paint, they might work to replace it. We don't want to teach children that punishment erases the damage done. We want them to take responsibility and make it right.

When we focus our energies on blame and on trying to make children pay for their poor choices, children focus their energies on making excuses. When we focus our energies on problem solving, children are guided toward taking responsibility for their behavior choices. Here's how this might look in the classroom:

Blame

TEACHER: Adrian, I warned you about splashing water on the floor at the water table. Go find someplace else to play now.

ADRIAN: I didn't do it. Ja'Quan made me splash the water.

TEACHER: I'm not talking about Ja'Quan, I'm talking about you. I saw you doing it. Now walk away.

ADRIAN: (*Throws the cup in the water table, splashing again*) I hate this stupid school.

Problem Solving

TEACHER: Adrian, I see water on the floor by your feet at the water table. How are you going to take care of that?

ADRIAN: I didn't do it.

TEACHER: It doesn't matter who did it. But it's dangerous and needs cleaning up. What are your ideas to fix it?

ADRIAN: Ja'Quan and me can get the paper towels and wipe it up together.

TEACHER: That sounds like it might work. Try it out and see.

Make a conscious decision. Will you invest your energies in pointing the finger of blame and guilt, or will you encourage children to learn from their mistakes and guide them toward making a better future?

Making a Start

Where do we start when we try to figure out how best to respond to and support children in their growth and development? What characteristics make us effective guides for children? What kinds of environments will bring out the best in children?

Think for a few minutes about the best job you ever had. And also think about the worst job you ever had. Think about the workplace atmosphere; think about your supervisor. Fill in the chart on the next page with words and phrases that come to mind.

WORST JOB/WORST SUPERVISOR	BEST JOB/BEST SUPERVISOR

After you have filled the chart with your initial thoughts, ask yourself these follow-up questions:

- How did you feel in each situation when you made a mistake?
- How did you feel in each situation when you did a good job?
- How did you feel about going to work each day?
- When you reflect back to each of these situations, which emotions come to the surface?

Add your reflections to the bottom of each of the columns, then review your lists when they are completed. Think once again of what each job brought out in you, how you felt, and how well you worked. Now take a deep breath and try to figure out how your lists relate to working with young children.

When we reflect on our own histories, it becomes clear what kinds of leaders and what kinds of environments bring out the best in people. A quick reflection on what kind of leaders we are and what kinds of environments we have established for children often reveals cause for celebration as well as startling and disturbing revelations.

You may realize that you have many of the qualities you have admired in your own best supervisors. You may suddenly understand why many of your practices have been so successful.

You may also begin to understand why you struggle in other areas. This is not meant as an exercise in guilt. It is meant as a paradigm shift—a new way to look at an old situation. This new view may reveal many things that were hidden before. The first step in change is to be able to see the current situation objectively and identify any problem areas.

When I first did this exercise, I ran the gamut of emotions. Initially I was shocked. I had always viewed myself as an excellent and conscientious teacher. Suddenly,

though, I saw many of my practices in a different light. Would I want to work for me? The answer was a firm no. Justification came next. I rationalized my practices by saying that adults are different than children, that in the workplace some of these children would be "fired," and that jobs and school are two different things. Even though a part of me understood that changes needed to be made, I felt defensive about my practices. I had learned and modeled my guidance practices from the best of the best. I have always tried to be a good and moral person who only wants the best for children. I couldn't accept the clear revelation that some things I was saying and doing with them were harmful.

When I entertained the notion of making some changes, my feelings moved on to panic and being overwhelmed. Where to start? How to do it? Would the children get out of control? What if it didn't work?

Understanding your definitions of quality leaders and environments will help you learn how to become the teacher you dream of being. Children respond to different leadership styles in the same ways we do. The same things that motivate us in the workplace motivate children in the school environment. The same qualities we admire in leaders in our own lives are the qualities that children respond to in the classroom community. Become a leader who fosters positive attitudes, behavior, and responses.

Would I want to work for me? That is the key question to ask yourself. The immutable law of nature is that we will reap what we sow. If your supervisor's behavior would motivate you to grow and change, if that supervisor's practice would excite you about doing your best work, if that environment would feel good and keep you coming back for more, then it will probably do the same for the children in your care.

What we teach children is directly linked to how we teach children. The values that a leader establishes for her organization become an integral part of the institutional culture itself. Leaders who model and practice honesty create institutions with honesty as a part of their culture. When leaders reward competition, the organizational atmosphere becomes competitive rather than cooperative. As you begin to think about your best approach to this monumental leadership role, stay aware that what we teach is directly linked to how we teach.

Institutional Culture

Like home and school, work environments have cultures. The institutional culture of a business can either support or undermine the people who work there. When we look at the lists that people generate about their best and worst job situations, we find common themes regardless of the industry in which they work. The lists for those who work in restaurants, offices, construction, and teaching are very similar. Lists about people's best work environments include items like adequate training opportunities, respect, teamwork, professionalism, empowerment, problem solving,

and celebration of each person's contributions. It may surprise you to discover that these workplaces are also identified as the most productive and successful work environments. The time and energy that leaders invest in building supportive and healthy environments is not an interruption of business, but is in fact one of the cornerstones of a successful business.

WHEN LEADERS . . .	INSTEAD OF . . .	THEY ESTABLISH A CULTURE THAT VALUES . . .
Develop relationships	Putting mission and product before people; encouraging competition instead of teamwork	Attachment and affiliation
Think things over and respond thoughtfully and professionally	Reacting impulsively and in the heat of the moment	Self-regulation
Are proactive; acknowledge and resolve problems	Reacting every time something goes wrong, either ignoring problems or looking to place blame	Problem solving
Empower individuals and teams to make good decisions; encourage best work by focusing on intrinsic motivation	Micromanaging people; trying to control people by using rewards and reprimands	Initiative
Honor and recognize strengths and contributions of all	Focusing on challenges and deficits; publicly favoring some and speaking poorly of others	Respect

In the same way, the investment of time and energy in building a mutually respectful, proactive classroom atmosphere for children is not an interruption of the curriculum, but is the cornerstone of all positive growth and learning. It is just as important as beginning literacy and math; in fact, it makes teaching those things possible.

The specific answers of what to do, how to interact, and what kind of atmosphere and environment to set up lie within each teacher, and each teacher will have a somewhat different approach. Teaching is an art, not a science, and each teacher will express that art with her own distinctive style. At the heart, though, each teacher can discover certain guiding principles to guide his way, and for many of us, these guiding principles follow some general themes.

Develop relationships

WHEN LEADERS . . .	INSTEAD OF . . .	THEY ESTABLISH A CULTURE THAT VALUES . . .
Develop relationships	Putting mission and product before people; encouraging competition instead of teamwork	Attachment and affiliation

Good leaders know that the most powerful path to maximizing their impact and influence is to nurture healthy and respectful relationships and generate mutual respect. Investing in people expands their sphere of influence. Powerful leaders establish themselves as allies instead of opponents. As they lead their organization, they focus on relationships instead of on judgment.

Teachers can expand their spheres of influence in the same way as other organizational leaders:

- Develop a community based upon mutual respect.
- Establish yourself as each child's biggest ally and most loyal cheerleader.
- Keep your focus on maintaining healthy relationships while avoiding judgment.
- Expand your sphere of influence with a focus on relationships and the social and emotional climate of the classroom.

When in doubt about how to respond, reflect back on your favorite job and your favorite supervisor. Ask yourself "How would I like my own boss to handle this situation?"

The number one factor in children's development of positive beliefs and skills is the quality of the relationship between the child and the teaching staff. Children with easygoing temperaments, a quick smile, and well-developed social skills generally know how to engage adults and draw them close. On the other hand, children with difficult and challenging behavior do not bring out the best from most adults. It is very easy for our relationships to deteriorate quickly with these children. The result, unfortunately, is that the children who most need us to be emotionally attached are the same children who are most skilled at driving us away.

Learning a multitude of professional strategies, techniques, and interventions will help strengthen relationships with each of the unique personalities in your classrooms. When personal relationships have been damaged, you can use these strategies to begin repairing attachment, which is so necessary for the development of healthy beliefs and skills.

Think things over and respond thoughtfully and professionally

WHEN LEADERS . . .	INSTEAD OF . . .	THEY ESTABLISH A CULTURE THAT VALUES . . .
Think things over and respond thoughtfully and professionally	Reacting impulsively and in the heat of the moment	Self-regulation

When faced with children's behavior, two parts of us respond simultaneously—our impulsive, personal selves and our thoughtful, professional selves. The personal self often reacts from the feeling part of the brain, while the professional self reacts from the thinking portion of the brain.

To help clarify the difference between personal and professional responses, imagine that you are an emergency room nurse. The paramedics rush an accident victim in on a gurney, rattling off statistics, IV tubes swinging. As the first nurse on the scene, you pull back the sheets and see a devastating injury. The emotional, personal part of you initially retreats in horror—your eyes squeeze shut, your heart pounds, and your stomach gets tight. That is the feeling part of the brain reacting. However, you have a job to do. Immediately, you take a deep breath and move to the professional, thinking portion of the brain to give your best responses at the moment to save the patient.

Responding professionally to children requires a similar skill. The feeling part of you may be horrified, frustrated, repulsed, or hurt by a particular child's behavior at a particular moment. That human reaction is fine and to be expected. However, as a teacher, you have a job to do. You must move yourself from your personal feelings to your professional self. The thinking portion of your brain contains your long-term goals for the child, strategies you have tried and discarded, strategies waiting to be tested, your knowledge of beliefs and skills, the length of time until the next transition, and other situations that must be dealt with simultaneously. Your thinking brain can compute all the available information to come up with your best professional response for the moment.

For example, you might feel offended when a child picks food off her plate at snack and drops it on the floor. While your emotional self might say, "Pick that food up off the floor this instant and move to this table by yourself," your professional self might evaluate all the currently available information and say, "At school, when you don't want to eat you can say 'Miss Bev, I don't want to have snack.'"

Here's a strategy you might try to move from your impulsive, feeling self to your thoughtful, professional self: (a) stop, (b) take a step back physically, and (c) say to yourself, "What unusual behavior." Practice this response to give yourself the two seconds you need to move from the impulsive part of your brain to the thinking part of your brain. This strategy also allows you to assign the behavior back to the child where it belongs, instead of seeing children's behavior as a personal affront.

When you move yourself into that professional, thinking portion of your brain, you have switched into a problem-solving mode and have become a professional resource for the child. Isn't that part of what being a teacher is all about?

Acknowledge and resolve problems

WHEN LEADERS . . .	INSTEAD OF . . .	THEY ESTABLISH A CULTURE THAT VALUES . . .
Act proactively; acknowledge and resolve problems	Reacting every time something goes wrong, either ignoring problems or looking to place blame	Problem solving

Reacting to a problem or a behavior can be looked upon as rushing in to fix an emergency situation in process. For example, Tink bites Mack and an adult rushes over to deal with the situation.

Being proactive means attempting to prevent the problem from happening over and over. In this case, it might mean having Tink be your partner during transitions for the next few days to keep her close during a vulnerable time when she might strike out. At the same time, you would observe Tink to understand the underlying problem behind the biting so that you can address it.

To best understand the difference between being reactive and proactive when working with young children's behavior, imagine that suddenly the smoke detector goes off in your home. You rush everyone out and call the fire department, and they quickly arrive to put out the fire. They report to you that the fire began in the ceiling crawl space of the kitchen and that they were successful at putting it out. A few days later, the detector goes off again. Everyone is herded safely out of the house; the fire department arrives, puts out the fire, and reports to you that the fire started in the ceiling crawl space of the kitchen. The following week, the detector goes off again.

What is wrong with this story?

Putting out the fire is a reactive way of dealing with the problem. It is a crisis intervention technique. A proactive strategy would be to look for the source of the problem and address the cause so that the problem doesn't keep repeating itself. It doesn't matter how many times you put out that kitchen fire—until you find out *why* the fire gets started, you will continue to have the problem. Once you invest the time to hire an electrician to check out that crawl space and fix the problem, you will no longer have to waste your time calling the fire department.

Responding to children's behavior is very similar. Some problems seem to happen over and over again. Stormasia keeps hitting kids; Antwon always yells out at circle time; Patrick never participates at clean-up time. When children continue to repeat

behavior regardless of the response, it's a sign that it is time to discover the source of the fire.

Empower and encourage

WHEN LEADERS . . .	INSTEAD OF . . .	THEY ESTABLISH A CULTURE THAT VALUES . . .
Empower individuals and teams to make good decisions; encourage best work by focusing on intrinsic motivation	Micromanaging people; trying to control people by using rewards and reprimands	Initiative

One of our goals for children is that they learn to take responsibility for their behavior. However, so many of the hand-me-down strategies that teachers use assign the bulk of responsibility to the adult, not the child. Even the common term *behavior management* spells out who takes the largest burden for controlling behavior—the teacher! Rather than learning more strategies to manage children's behavior, we might better reach our long-term goals by empowering children to manage their own behavior. It's not a matter of "doing *to*" children. Instead it's a matter of "doing *with*" children.

For example, when we say to a child, "I like the way you clean up toys," what we are really trying to do is to manipulate them to behave in a way to get our affection. Sometimes we try to get one child to behave by praising another; for example, getting JoJo to sit in circle by saying to the group, "I like the way Mike is sitting." Our praise to Mike may be well deserved. However, it becomes false praise when it's a tool to manipulate another child's behavior.

Instead, make it your goal to empower children to manage their own behavior.

When I was first learning how to guide young children's behavior from more experienced teachers, the core message was "reward behavior you want to see and punish behavior you don't want to see." This message is still implicitly and explicitly present in most of the ways we think about guiding children's behavior. Rewards and punishments do, indeed, cause rapid change in behavior for most children. However, the behavior changes will only last as long as the reward and punishment system is present. When individuals are *intrinsically* motivated, they make decisions based upon their internal values and beliefs. When they are *extrinsically* motivated, they make decisions based on external factors—what other people might think or do as a result of their behavior or the promise of reward or the fear of punishment.

Think for a moment of someone you admire and respect. What motivates that person to do the things for which you admire them? In all likelihood, it is not for the promise of reward or the fear of punishment. That person probably has some guiding principles of behavior, a moral compass, that they follow.

What's wrong with extrinsic motivation? Think about it a minute. As children grow and become adolescents and then adults, do you want them to make decisions based on what other people might think about them? Is that how you want them to handle peer pressure in high school? Do you want them to make the right decisions only as long as they are rewarded for them? Or do you want them to have an internal sense of what's right and wrong, a moral compass that they follow regardless of what others think or what the material rewards are for their decisions? Which makes them a stronger person?

When children grow to be adults, the moral police and the sticker lady don't trail them throughout the day. When adults do the dishes, bring soup to a sick friend, or show up for work on time, they don't get a gold star. We make those behavior choices because of an inner motivation to do what we know needs doing or what we feel is the right thing to do. Isn't that what we want for children?

Honor and recognize strengths and contributions of all

WHEN LEADERS ...	INSTEAD OF ...	THEY ESTABLISH A CULTURE THAT VALUES ...
Honor and recognize strengths and contributions of all	Focusing on challenges and deficits; favoring some over others	Respect

The story of the two wolves has been passed around in many versions, although I have been unable to track down the original writer. One night, a wise grandfather sat his granddaughter on his knee to tell her the tale of the battle between two wolves that was going on inside himself.

"One wolf," the grandfather said, "is angry, resentful, jealous, hurtful, a quitter, a liar, greedy, and arrogant. The other wolf is filled with kindness, compassion, good intention, honesty, generosity, faith, and humility."

"Which one will win, Grandfather?" the girl asked.

He replied, "The winner is the one that gets fed."

Common sense seems to dictate that by constantly catching children who are off-task and reminding them to get back on track, we will change behavior for the better. Instead, we are often surprised when the behavior we are trying to change not only continues but becomes even more frequent! It doesn't seem to make sense until we reflect back on the lessons of the two wolves parable.

Recognition invites repetition. Children crave to be noticed and recognized. Early on they learn that smiles and gurgles will bring adult attention, which leads to even more smiling and gurgling from the baby.

In our interactions with children, the behavior that gets our focus, attention, and energy is what will grow and flourish. When we notice children's block structures, they make more block structures. When we comment on their skills on the climber, they

climb more. And for many children, when we notice their off-task behavior, they increase their off-task behavior. Recognition invites repetition.

Think again of the story of PJ in chapter 1. When I focused on PJ's "flaws," things only got worse. Once I shifted my focus to PJ's strengths, the problem behavior began to recede and he began to flourish. The wolf that gets fed wins out in the end. Make sure you are feeding the right wolf.

Supportive Interactions, Classroom Culture, and Special Activities

Each of the next six chapters of this book focuses on building one of the six strengths. Within each chapter, activities and strategies are broken down into three categories: supportive interactions, classroom culture, and special activities. This order is deliberate. The most powerful impact we can have on children's behavior is through our daily, personal interactions. A classroom culture that supports and upholds the strengths is the next most powerful intervention. Our interactions and the classroom environment exist from the moment the child walks in the door until they leave at the end of the day. Invest the bulk of your energy in modifying interactions and the classroom culture.

Interactions and Relationships

Who we are and what we live—what we model for children—has the most powerful impact of any strategy on children. Our talk to children becomes their self-talk. Our expectations become their expectations. As an adult, you have the wisdom and experience needed to be a powerful influence on a child's life. Your interactions and interventions can help children become empowered citizens, committed to solving problems and making purposeful choices in the best interest of themselves and others.

Our daily interactions with children not only affect our personal relationships, but also model and set community norms for the entire classroom. The significance of adult modeling was brought home to me when my daughter, Tati, was a four-year-old in preschool. One of her favorite games to play at home with her dolls was a game she called "Christopher Vedra." She would set out a dozen dolls on the floor, each one lying on a baby blanket. Then she would announce, "Naptime! Everybody get quiet now." A moment later, she would begin to drag one of the baby blankets with baby across the floor saying sternly, "I told you to be quiet, Christopher Vedra. Now I have to move your mat." Another moment would pass and once again she would drag Christopher's mat to another area of the floor. This reprimand-and-move sequence would be repeated ten or fifteen times, each time more severely. Need I tell you that Christopher Vedra was a very active and challenging child in her class at school?

How often have you seen children playing teacher at school and heard your words come from their mouths? How many times have you watched children replay last night's domestic squabbles in the dramatic play area?

Sometimes what we are inadvertently doing at school is modeling exactly the behavior we are trying to stop. For instance, many teachers say to a crying child, "As soon as you are done crying, I will be happy to listen to your words." I learned that line from other teachers when I began working, and I must have used it a thousand times or more before I examined my behavior a bit more closely. When we say these words, what messages are we sending to the child in distress? And what messages are we sending to the rest of the class about socially appropriate ways to respond to people in distress? Twenty minutes later, when Isabel hits Jarred and Jarred is crying, we attempt to employ "Standard Teacher Script Number Two," which goes something like this: "Isabel, look at Jarred's face. How do you think he is feeling?" Isabel is most likely thinking, *As soon as he is done with that dang crying I'll listen to what he has to say.*

As we guide, support, and live with children, we can never lose sight that they are watching and listening to everything we do. To get children to say thank you, make sure you say thank you. To teach children to solve problems, make sure they see and hear you solve problems. To help children learn how to manage frustration, make sure you demonstrate your own anger management skills.

Look back again to the lists of qualities of your most and least favorite jobs. How many of the factors had to do with relationships and daily interactions? Was there an atmosphere of trust and respect? Was collegiality promoted or was there dog-eat-dog competition? Did administration establish an environment of all work and no play, or did the workplace include an element of joy and playfulness? Did you feel alone or did you feel like a part of a team?

As the leader of the classroom, you establish the standards for everyone in the room. The actions you take, the beliefs you have about individual children, and the learning environment you establish will be directly reflected in children's behavior and beliefs about themselves and each other.

Next to home, school is the biggest influence on young children. And next to the family, teachers are the biggest single influence on children. You have it within your power to make a significant impact on the beliefs and skills of the children in your care. And affecting beliefs in the right direction will result in the internal growth and development that children need to thrive in the classroom and in the larger world.

The Classroom Environment

The rituals and routines—the way of life you establish in your classroom—are a reflection of your philosophy and your leadership. Are there jobs for everyone in the classroom? Do you have a consistent daily schedule and a clear room arrangement? Do you have a routine to welcome new children and say good-bye to children who leave the program? The best way to help children learn the skills they need is to introduce and weave the skills regularly into many situations throughout the year.

Think about how you would like the children in your classroom to talk to each other. How would you like them to ask each other if they can play? How do you want

them to share tools at the playdough table? What words would you like them to say if they accidentally hurt someone? Children learn what they live. Plan carefully how you will ask for a turn when you sit to work on a puzzle with a child or what you will say when you must interrupt a child's conversation.

Special activities help reinforce the lessons that children are getting from personal interactions and the classroom culture. They're a nice supplement, but by no means do they do the job on their own.

One Step at a Time

As you read the rest of this book, remember that growth and change involve a series of baby steps. Gradually, learn one new technique at a time—try it out and begin to weave it into your daily practice until you feel comfortable with it before you try another. Changing belief systems may be a revolution, but changing practice is an evolution. And similarly, it is important to remember that growth and change in children are also an evolution, not a revolution. Certainly, some strategic changes in practice have an impact on children and their behavior in immediate and dramatic ways. But true growth and change happen slowly over time, for us and for them.

What is the destination of our journey, then? As we have reflected on children that we know, we begin to see that those who are not armed with the six strengths struggle to survive from day to day. Their destination is mere survival. Our goal is for children to thrive. In our frustration or disappointment with a child's behavior, we need to learn to keep our focus on our long-term goals for the child rather than on the quick fix. Focus on reward and on its mirror side, punishment, produces fast yet temporary results. Focus on building relationships, self-regulation, problem solving, initiative, and respect for self and others helps children build the strengths they will need to thrive in school and in life.

As teachers of young children, it is important to keep our eye on the goal so that we don't get lost along the way. Help children learn to make good choices for themselves, for their communities, and for society as a whole.

Many children are unable to reach that destination alone. They need compassionate and clear-minded adults to help lead them along the path. Be that adult.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. What are some advantages and some disadvantages you have found in using punishments and rewards to manage children's behavior?
2. Discuss the quote "What we teach children is directly linked to how we teach children."
3. A Chinese proverb tells us "A child's life is like a piece of paper on which every person leaves a mark." How might a teacher's leadership style in the classroom have a long-lasting impact on a child's life?

Exercises

1. Increase your awareness of your personal interactions with children over the course of a day. What are some ways your current practices are helping children build the six strengths? What is one practice you are thinking of changing?
2. What kind of support do you need when you are making changes in your own life? How might you use this knowledge to support children in your classroom as they learn to develop the six strengths and change their own behaviors?

Reflection/Journal Assignment

Reflect on your favorite job or favorite supervisor, and describe your vision of the kind of classroom you would like to lead. What would the classroom feel like when you walked in the door each day? How would everyone in the classroom community interact with each other? How would successes be recognized? How would problems be solved? As the children's supervisor, how would you like them to see you?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. On the left side, there is a vertical margin or binding edge, which appears slightly textured or shadowed, suggesting it might be part of a notebook or binder. The overall appearance is clean and professional, typical of standard stationery.