

Principles of positive parenting can be shared during pediatric visits

December 13, 2016

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Article type: [Focus on Subspecialties](#)

Topics: [Developmental/Behavioral Issues](#)

All parents want their children to succeed academically; have a safe and healthy childhood; and grow into independent adults. Yet the *how* of parenting often is colored by past experiences, values, beliefs and culture.

Positive parenting programs can help caregivers learn effective skills. Since access to such programs varies, the principles of positive parenting can be applied to primary care encounters. Clinicians can help families by talking early and often about the central role they play in their child's learning and development and by modeling positive parenting techniques.

Pediatricians also can use standardized developmental-behavioral screening tools at well-child visits to identify parental concerns, review the child's successes and discuss normal development, school readiness and social-emotional health.

Below are some critical concepts to help prevent behavioral/parenting issues.



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Positive parenting programs can help

Positive parenting programs can help caregivers learn effective skills.

ABCs of behavior

Children imitate words and behaviors — the good, the not so good and everything in between. Starting at the first checkup, point out how the child responds to the parent, and find ways to reinforce what parents are doing well.

Educating parents about the “ABCs” of behavior also can help them understand what triggers the child’s behavior (**A**ntecedents), identify the **B**ehavior of concern and learn actions they can take in response (**C**onsequences). Helping parents to see what happens right before and after an undesirable behavior might give clues as to how to begin responding differently. Explain that discipline doesn’t mean “punish”; it means “teach.”

‘Time in’ promotes wellness

“Time in” is a way for parents to interact with their child through child-directed play, which includes understanding a child’s cues/needs, learning to engage during play, modeling appropriate behaviors and stimulating language. There is strong evidence that this type of interaction promotes physical, emotional and social wellness.

Pediatricians can teach parents how to give a play-by-play about what the child is doing like a sports announcer to focus on:

- School readiness skills (“Wow, you have one block, two blocks and three blocks.”)
- Feelings (“You look so proud!”)
- Pro-social skills (“Give the car to Timmy so he can have a turn.”)

Helping parents to pay positive attention during play supports the child’s learning during everyday moments. With age, the concept of time in changes from playing with their child to having regular check-ins about school, friendships and interests.

Praise: an undervalued, powerful tool

Parents may not want to praise their child or may prefer providing praise only for perfection. However, praise can help children learn that what they are doing is appropriate and that their actions are valued. Praise also can be used to shape behavior during complicated tasks and promote persistence.

‘No’ means ‘no’

Positive reinforcement and consistency should be the mainstay of parenting at any level. Rewarding desirable behaviors results in more desirable behaviors. Setting rules that are reinforced consistently allows children to thrive in a secure environment.

Toddlers: The primary goal is to teach expectations through sustained effort. Toddlers have limited means to communicate effectively; meltdowns are common. Since consequences aren’t understood, the child should be removed gently from the situation or redirected.

Early childhood: Children are gaining independence but lack mature self-control. Parents should focus on appropriately modeling and reinforcing positive behaviors with praise. Selective use of ignoring, consequences (for recurring misbehavior) or time out (for high-intensity behaviors like aggression) has specific, limited applications.

Elementary school: Academic and social challenges result in successes and failures, both of which are valuable experiences. Supervision can be relaxed but must continue from not too far a distance. Coach parents to focus on helping children learn how to solve problems.

Practice implications

Parenting is hard work. It takes time, attention and a plan, with the end result always in sight. Regardless of the type of pediatric practice, parenting issues are likely to come up.

Taking a preventive stance and listening to parents' concerns is the first step. Modeling positive parenting techniques and helping parents set small, realistic changes in how they respond to their children are the keys to success.

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