

# Guide Children's Behavior



**Help children behave in positive ways by setting clear limits, modeling cooperative behavior, and dealing respectfully with challenging behaviors.**

Think of a situation in which you weren't sure how you were expected to behave. Perhaps you felt this way when you

- › Started working in a new program
- › Went back to school after having been away for several years
- › Joined friends from a different culture at a ceremonial occasion
- › Visited a new country or community and spent time in a culture different from your own

Was there someone who guided you so that you could feel more comfortable, confident, and competent? What did that person do and say to guide you? Afterward, how did you feel about the person who helped you?

## Connect with Children by Guiding Behavior in Positive Ways

Guiding children's behavior is something done throughout the day, not just when a child acts in a way that is unsafe or unacceptable. You guide behavior by establishing predictable routines, setting clear rules with children, and modeling kindness and respect. You are also attentive and aware of what is going on. Together, these actions help children feel noticed, confident, and secure. Children experience your attention and guidance as a caring embrace holding everything together. They know you're on their team.

Sometimes a child's behavior calls for more specific and direct attention from you. In these moments, reacting with negative emotion—instead of being calm and deliberate—can undermine the positive relationship you're working to build with that child.

These challenging situations can be turned in a positive direction when you use mindfulness strategies such as taking three deep breaths before saying anything or tuning into your senses to quiet your emotions by noticing the texture of your sweater or the colors on the paintings hanging on the wall (Erwin et al. 2017). These strategies can make it easier to remember that you are on the child's team and want her to feel that way. When you demonstrate this by connecting with the child to deepen your relationship, you make it possible for her to learn new, more positive behaviors.

You open the door to a Powerful Interaction when you

- › **Treat the child the way you want him to treat you and others.** The children you care for and teach look up to you and want to be like you. When you model positive, cooperative behavior, they will be more likely to interact with each other in positive ways.

Ms. Cate makes every effort to treat Robert, an active and at times aggressive first grader, with respect. It pays off the day she watches in delight as Robert walks over to a group of children on the playground and, instead of pushing his way in and trying to grab the ball, asks, "Can I play?" Later she says to him, "Way to go, Robert. I see you asked to join the game." She begins a Powerful Interaction to affirm his new behaviors for entering play with others.

- › **Help a child feel secure by setting clear, realistic limits for behavior.** When you set limits, you build trust between you and children by giving them the security that comes with knowing what to expect and what is expected of them. Limits also help you teach children about what is safe, acceptable behavior. Here are two examples from Mrs. Greene's family child care home:

At lunchtime, 3-year-old Alejandro reaches for a butter knife and proudly spreads some hummus on a cracker. Still holding the knife, he gets up and heads for the dress-up corner. “Alejandro,” says Mrs. Greene. “Remember our rule: Sit at the table when you’re using a knife. Would you like to sit down at the table and eat your cracker? Or would you like to give me your knife, wash your hands, and go play?” Alejandro looks at Mrs. Greene, then at the knife in his hand. He comes back to the table. “Now you can enjoy that crunchy cracker,” says Mrs. Greene with a smile. Alejandro smiles back through the crumbs.

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At naptime, Mrs. Greene hums softly while rocking Kylie, the baby in her mixed-age group. Kylie reaches up and tugs hard on Mrs. Greene’s hair. Gently pulling Kylie’s hand away, Mrs. Greene says softly, “That hurts. Let’s be gentle with each other.” Mrs. Greene rubs her hand gently on Kylie’s head.

- **Manage your emotions so that you can help children manage theirs.** Extreme behaviors, such as temper tantrums, biting, or hitting, are the result of children’s strong emotions. You are likely to have a strong emotional reaction to these behaviors as well. In these situations, children need you on their team more than ever. When you draw on your positive relationship and the feeling of connection that has developed between you over time, you can respond in a way that benefits the child, strengthens your relationship, and enables the child to learn from the situation. Watch as Mr. Vargas uses a Powerful Interaction to prevent biting and to connect with Shelley:

Mr. Vargas has been keeping a close eye on 3-year-old Shelley since she bit another child earlier this morning. He notices Shelley heading for the cardboard box house, where two other children are playing. *That could be trouble*, he thinks. Mr. Vargas scans the room. The other children are busy playing. Taking a calming breath, he nods at his teaching partner to let her know he’s going to focus on Shelley. Then he heads toward the house. Mr. Vargas does a quick Me Check: *I know I’m still upset about Shelley biting this morning. I bet she’s upset too. I need to let go of my irritation with her and stay really calm so that I don’t add any more tension to our interaction.*

As Mr. Vargas approaches, Shelley is pushing her way into the house. As the other children protest, Shelley pushes on the door harder. As Shelley leans toward Karey’s arm and opens her mouth, Mr. Vargas steps in. Gently but firmly grasping Shelley’s shoulders, Mr. Vargas says quietly, “Shelley, I’m not going to let you bite Karey. I’ll help you join in the play.” Shelley looks up at him. After a few seconds, she leans in against Mr. Vargas and her face relaxes a little bit. They connect.

Sometimes a child’s biting or other behavior can be so extreme that your focus must be on stopping the behavior and protecting everyone’s safety. Even in these situations, children deserve and need you to be present and respectful rather than angry. Some additional guidance from a mental health professional may be needed to help you support the child.



## Reality Check

Sometimes your feelings or biases may get in the way of making the best decisions about what to say and do in a Powerful Interaction. This happens. When it does, being a professional early childhood educator means taking time to reflect on what you brought to the interaction and being sure to take some steps to reconnect with the child in a positive way so that you can continue to strengthen your relationship.

## Tips for Guiding Children’s Behavior

Remember that you guide children’s behavior each day as you interact with them. Some ways you can do this include the following:

**Be realistic about what you can expect from individual children.** Take into account a child’s age and what is happening in that child’s life as you consider what kind of guidance he needs. It makes sense that Mason, whose mother is in the hospital, is scared, angry, and worried. He needs extra help from you to deal with his feelings of anger, frustration, fear, and worry and to avoid fighting with other children.

**Scan your room regularly to anticipate problems.** Who needs your guidance in a Powerful Interaction? Are there any potential behavior situations brewing?

Ms. Atem notices that Alicia is playing with blocks and her tower keeps falling over. She thinks, *Alicia’s mom told me she’s been a little grumpy this morning because she couldn’t wear her favorite leggings since they were in the wash. I can see her getting frustrated. How can I interact to prevent a problem from starting? I’m going to go over and sit down next to her.*

**Coordinate with your teaching partner.** Recall that Mr. Vargas signaled his coteacher with a nod as he went to help Shelley. Learn to cue each other about where and when to get involved to prevent conflict and tension.

**Partner with families.** Let families know how important it is for you to know about issues that arise at home day by day. The news they share in the morning about a child’s sleeping, eating, toileting, mood, and changes in routine at home helps you anticipate and guide children’s behavior at school in positive ways. When you know Elinor didn’t get much sleep last night, you might offer her an early nap or be sure she has space in a stroller when you walk to the park so her tiredness doesn’t lead to a tantrum—or to you having to carry a tired baby back to your center.

**Take a long-term view.** Remember that learning how to behave and get along with others takes time and practice. Some of us are still learning.

**Help children learn to self-regulate.** Teaching skills such as persistence, turn-taking, and expressing emotions without hurting another person is critical to guiding children's behavior (NAEYC 2018).

**Establish clear and consistent routines** so children know what to expect (NAEYC 2018).

**Plan group projects** so children learn how to work and play together (NAEYC 2018).

Here are some tips for dealing with a challenging behavior:

**Put aside your feelings and recognize your biases.** Too often, it can feel like a child's challenging behavior pits you and the child against each other. Remember that you are on the same team.

**Make it clear that the problem is the child's behavior, not the child.** It's the biting, hitting, or pushing that you want to stop—or better yet, prevent. Find ways to reassure children that you have not stopped liking *them*.

**Use a tone of voice that is firm, serious, and calm** rather than angry when addressing a child's behavior. Anger is scary, and when children feel scared they cannot learn anything.

**Keep and use your sense of humor.** When appropriate for the child and the situation, a silly face, dance, rhyme, or joke can release tension like magic.



## How's It Going?

Are you connecting with children and building a foundation for learning as you encourage positive behavior in Powerful Interactions? Here are some clues that the answer is yes.

Children may

- › Be more relaxed and at ease
- › Use some of the same language you use to guide behavior as they work and play with their peers: “Hitting isn’t safe,” “Don’t forget to use your words,” and “We might not have enough space here for all of us to work together”
- › Use some of the same language to remind themselves of appropriate behavior; for example, you might notice Jorge start to run across the room, then slow down as he says to himself, “We walk inside”



You may

- › Use a calmer voice as you guide challenging behaviors
- › Anticipate more situations and notice that fewer challenging behaviors are occurring
- › Have more positive relationships with children who have challenging behaviors

Families may

- › Begin talking more about encouraging positive behavior than about making children behave
- › Ask you for advice about how to encourage such behavior and share stories of how they encourage it at home

You may also notice that the overall climate of your program is calmer as children learn positive behaviors.



### Remember

Guiding children’s behavior is a way to connect and strengthen your relationships with them, making it possible to transform a potential behavior problem into a learning opportunity.