

Seven Steps to Successful Parenting Through Behavioral Challenges

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Outlined below are seven steps, that when used together, will help you gain a happy working relationship with you child. These steps help promote a parent-child relationship based on respect and mutual enjoyment for both you and your child. These steps outline how to gain “instructional control” or in other terms, a positive working relationship. Regardless of your philosophy on parenting, without the ability for your child to listen and follow simple directions, day to day functioning is going to be frustrating for both you and your child. These steps are meant to be used all together as a way of relating to and working with you child, not in consecutive order.

Step 1: Show your child that you are the one in control of the items or activities he/she wants and that you will decide if, when and how long they can have access to them.

What does it mean: This doesn't mean depriving your children of the things they love! It does mean that you should be seen as the source of those things and you control when they have access to those items. You child has the opportunity to earn these things if they follow simple directions and behave appropriately.

How do you do it: Make sure you have control of the “good stuff”. Favorite toys can be put away after playing until they have been earned again. TV remotes should be in your control, same with ipads. Wifi can be turned off if needed. Special treats/snacks are placed out of reach. Taking control of the preferred items and GIVING access is MUCH easier than the alternative of trying to remove these items for misbehavior.

- *Step 2: Show your child that you are FUN! Make each interaction you have with them an enjoyable experience so that they will want to follow your directions to earn more time, sharing experiences with you.*

What does it mean: Along with making yourself the gatekeeper of fun things, you always want to be considering a “fun thing.” These steps are not intended to making you the ultimate disciplinarian; instead they are steps to help you balance having a fun, loving relationship with your child that also sets you up to have the ability to give a direction and have it be followed.

How do you do it: Set up times where you are giving undivided attention and following the child's lead. This doesn't need to be hours and hours. Short amounts of fully present and child lead time can be just as effective. Use declarative sentences “Wow! That is a really cool lego car” as opposed to delivering instructions “Pass me the red lego”. You can use this time to chat with your child in a low-pressure way, and shouldn't require anything of them in return. This is also called “Pairing” as you are pairing yourself with things that are naturally enjoyable and reinforcing for your child.

- *Step 3: Show your child that you can be TRUSTED. Always say what you mean and mean what you say. If you say your child should be doing something, don't allow them access to reinforcement until it has been acceptably completed. This includes prompting to completion if necessary.*

What does it mean: Most often words end up being threats rather than consequences- meaning we often say things like “if you don't stop yelling, we are leaving this birthday party” and very infrequently does this result in the behavior stopping or you following through with leaving the party. At times when we have set expectations- no matter how big or small, do not reward your child for avoiding you by letting your instruction remain unfulfilled. Until your child completes the expectation you have set out, it's important to ensure that no other choices are reinforced. This will teach your child that the choice you are attempting to teach is in their best interest and over time they will choose to make that choice sooner and more often.

How Do You Do It: Initially, this means you shouldn't be giving directives to your child that you know you can't follow through with! In this crazy time where we are trying to balance it all, we all have a lot going on, if you know you only have an hour before you have a conference call, don't tell your child they need to complete their entire remote learning schedule before leaving the table! When you are initially working on setting limits, make sure the directions you are giving your child are easy and that the good stuff they earn from following those directions is worth it to them! Also to note—if you need your child to do something, make sure to tell them instead of asking. (eg “its time to take a shower” not “do you want to take a shower”).

- *Step 4: Show your child that following directions is to his benefit and the best way for him to obtain what he wants. Give your child easy directions as often as possible and then reinforce his decisions to participate by following them with good experiences.*

What does it mean: To show your child that good things happen when you follow directions, you want to give them as many opportunities as possible to get these “good things” (praise, tokens/stars, etc) and giving easy to follow directions will allow this to occur.

How do you do it: Praise and reward the things you know your child can do easily initially. You can do this by giving a small requirement to something that you would have been giving your child anyways. Example: your child asks for a snack, you can respond “sure, first wash hands and sit at the table, then you can have your snack. Ensure that the “first” statement/request is one that is not likely to result in challenging behavior. For instance, if washing hands is something that consistently or frequently causes your child to become upset, that would not be an appropriate choice of request. Keep in mind these instructions can be incredibly small and even unrelated to the current take- simple motor instructions are a great option to use e.g. high fives, thumbs up, knuckles etc

- *Step 5: In the early stages of earning instructional control with your child, reinforce after each positive response moving to an increasing variable ratio of reinforcement.*

What does it mean: Consistency is key! It allows us to teach a very clear relationship between your child's behavior and the result of such behavior (good behavior = good things!). In order to teach this, in the beginning every good choice is to be met with a positive result- in ABA terms we call this CRF (continuous reinforcement).

How do you do it: When we say reinforcement this does not necessarily mean toys or candy every time your child does something good. Reinforcement can be many different things and these things vary for each child and sometimes vary for the same child day or day (or even more frequently). Reinforcement can include hugs and tickles, high-fives, social praise, fun activities etc.

When using this “CRF” schedule of rewards in the beginning, ensure you have a good toolbox full of ideas that can be used. Using the same thing each time can cause the child to become less motivated by those rewards and subsequently start to engage in positive behaviors less often because of the loss of motivation. This doesn't mean that there needs to be a brand-new option each time you offer a reward, it just means to be aware of your child's likes and dislikes and give different forms of reinforcement throughout the day.

- *Step 6: Demonstrate that you know your child's priorities as well as your own*

What does it mean: Continue to monitor your child's interests each day- do these vary based on different situations/people/places? Continue to make efforts to expand your child's reinforcer “menu” meaning the variety of items/activities etc. that they enjoy and are motivated by.

In addition to this, it is also important for you to track and be aware of your own priorities and goals with your child. Being aware of your priorities will allow you to respond in a manner that serves your current priority.

How do you do it?: Watch and pay attention to your child! Continue to have the time set aside in your week to have fun with no strings attached as described in step 2. Make sure that you are looking at all the behaviors your child is displaying holistically. You want have a laundry list of things you hope that your child will do differently one day, but pick the biggest concerns or the ones that will have most impact first. For example, if you child is battling you after every request you make, work on following simple directions before working on something like chewing with their mouth open at the dinner table.

- *Step 7: Show your child that ignoring your instructions or choosing inappropriate behavior will not result in the acquisition of reinforcement.”.*

What does it mean: This means if your child is not following the direction you have given, they will not be receiving the “good stuff” you have for them, including items and fun interaction with you.

How do you do it?: This step is the hardest for most families. No one enjoys seeing their child upset and it may feel like this results in behaviors getting worse, but being consistent with it will result in the fastest rate of behavior improvement. If you have told your child “first put shoes and socks on and then we can go out and play” and they refuse to put their shoes on, they should not have the opportunity to go out and play. They also shouldn’t then have the opportunity to watch tv, play with toys, or play games with you. If you have given a direction and they are not following through, everything fun is shut down. Do not let yourself get angry when this is happening! You don’t need to list to your child the laundry list of things that they are missing out on, in fact, you don’t need to really say much at all. “Let me know when you are ready to listen” and then walking away is often the best thing you can do. Ignore the crying, ignore kicking and screaming (but do walk away so you aren’t an easy target). Then as soon as they have followed through with the initial direction, pour on the reinforcement like described in Step 4 and 5.

If you want further information about these 7 steps, or information about reinforcement and behavioral interventions. Please feel free to contact me at ahalbert@elced.org.

All information was summarized from publications from
Robert Schramm, MA BCBA
Author of Motivation and Reinforcement: Turning the Tables on Autism
The 7 Steps to Earning Instructional Control (with Dr. Megan Miller)
Both available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Schramm