

10 TECHNIQUES TO SHAPE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

Shaping means providing the child with cues and reinforcements that direct them toward desirable behavior. As you shape behavior, the child's personality tags along and also changes and improves. The main ways to shape a child's behavior are through:

praise
selective ignoring
time-out
consequences
motivators
reminders
negotiation
withdrawing privileges
humor

PRAISE

Praise is a valuable shaper; children want to please you and keep your approval. Yet, you can easily overdo it. Praise the behavior, not the person. Praises like "good girl" or "good boy" risk misinterpretation and are best reserved for training pets. These labels are too heavy for some children. ("If I don't do well, does that mean I'm bad?") Better is: "You did a good job cleaning your room." "That's a good decision." "I like the way you used lots of color in this picture." The child will see that the praise is sincere since you made the effort to be specific; it shows that you're paying attention. For quickies try "Great job!" or "Way to go!" or even "Yesss!" To avoid the "I'm valued by my performance" trap, acknowledge the act and let the child conclude the act is praiseworthy. If you praise every other move the child makes he will either get addicted to praise, or wonders why you are so desperate to make him feel good about himself. Be realistic. You don't have to praise, or even acknowledge, things he just does for the joy of it, for his own reasons. Shaping through praise works well if you have a specific behavior goal that you want to reach, for example, stopping whining. Initially, you may feel like you are acknowledging nearly every pleasant sound your child makes ("I like your sweet voice"). Eventually, as the whining subsides, the immediate need for praise lessens (of course, a booster shot is needed for relapses) and you move on to shaping another behavior.

Change praises

To keep your child's attention, change the delivery of your accolades. As you pass by the open door of the cleaner room, say: "Good job!" Show with body language a thumbs-up signal for the child who dresses herself. Written praises are a boon in large families. They show extra care. Private praises help, too. Leave little "nice work" notes on pillows, yellow "post-its" on homework, messages that convey that you noticed and that you are pleased. Children need praise, but don't overdo it. You don't want a child to look around for applause whenever she lifts a finger, like a dog expecting a cookie every time he does a trick.

As an exercise in praise-giving, write down how many times you praised and how many times you criticized your child in the last 24 hours. We call these pull-ups and put-downs. If your pull-ups don't significantly outnumber your pull-downs, you are shaping your child in the wrong direction.

Praise genuinely

Praise loses its punch if you shower acclaim on usual and expected behavior; yet when the child who habitually strikes out finally hits the ball, that's praiseworthy. Simply acknowledge expected behavior, rather than gushing praise. Acknowledgment is dispassionate praise that shapes a child to please himself rather than perform for

approval. Don't make up fake kudos. The child will see through them and begin to question even genuine praise. For example, before you praise, try to read your child's body language to see whether the child feels the job is praiseworthy: "Daddy, look at my drawing I did at school. I got an 'A'." If she approaches you eagerly, displaying her picture for all to see, this child deserves praise that shares her excitement. If she pulls the paper out of her schoolbag and tosses it on the kitchen table, praise may not be in order.

Use the art of complimenting

Teach your child to be comfortable giving and receiving compliments. Tell your child, "What a handsome boy you are" or "How pretty you look in that dress!" Eye and body contact during your delivery reinforces the sincerity of your acknowledgment. Make sure you're sincere. When you hear your children complimenting one another, compliment yourself for your modeling.

Children with weak self-worth have difficulty giving and receiving compliments. They are so hung up on how they imagine the receiver will take their tribute, that they clam up; they feel so unworthy of any compliment that they shrug off the compliment and put off the complimenter. If you are like that as a person, learn to give and take a compliment yourself so that you can model this to your child. Compliment yourself, "I feel good about the sale I made today!" Acknowledge your child's praise, "You're the best mommy." "Thank you, honey, I like to hear that." Some mothers (and fathers) hear these words often, yet deny the truth of their child's words by the outward response they give (sighing, gulping, frowning, shrugging or grimacing) and by their internal guilt trip. If this is you, get some help believing what your child intuitively knows—you're the best parent for this child. Parental self-image directly affects children's self-confidence and the ability to give and receive compliments comfortably.

Avoid praises with a hidden agenda

I had been on our teenager's case about dressing more modestly. One day I said, "I like your new wardrobe." She saw right through this, and took it as a put-down of her old wardrobe. She interpreted my comment as trying to manipulate what she wears. A better approach would have been more specific and more centered on her: "That longer shirt really makes you look graceful" or "Classy jacket—you look ready for college."

Problems with praise

While appropriately-used praise can shape behavior, it's not the only way to reinforce good behavior. In some ways it's superficial. Praise is an external motivator. The ultimate goal of discipline is self-discipline—**inner motivation**. We praise good grades and have always motivated our children by planting the idea that good grades are one ticket to success. We always temper our praise with "How do you feel about your report card? We want you to get good grades mainly because it makes you happy." When possible, turn the focus back on the child's feelings: "You played well at the recital. I bet you're relieved and proud." Best results with praise to shape behavior is setting the conditions that help children know how and when to **praise themselves**

EXPECT GOOD BEHAVIOR

Excessive praise will give children the message that obedience and good behavior are optional. It's better to give your child the message that he is doing exactly what you expect, not something out of the ordinary. Children are programmed to meet your expectations. Sometimes all that is needed for you to break a negative cycle is to expect good behavior. Treat them as if they really are going to choose right. When parents don't expect obedience, they generally don't get it

2. SELECTIVE IGNORING

To preserve parental sanity, in our large family we run a tight ship in certain situations. In other areas we are more lax. We have learned to ignore smallies and concentrate on biggies. A smallie is a behavior which is annoying but doesn't harm humans, animals, or property, or which even if uncorrected does not lead to a biggie. These childish irresponsibility's will self-correct with time and maturity. Ignoring helps your child respect the limits of a parent's job description (e.g., "I don't do petty arguments"). One day two five-year-olds were playing in our front yard, and they got into a toy squabble. No one was getting hurt. They tried to drag Martha into the ring. She simply said, "You kids are too big to act like this. That's such a silly little toy to get upset about. I'm not even going to waste my time getting involved." She walked away. The kids got the point and settled the problem themselves.

Ignoring undesirable behaviors works best if you readily acknowledge desirable ones. The ignored interrupter learns to enter adult conversations with "excuse me" once you reinforce the use of these polite addresses. Ignore the misbehavior, not the child.

Harmless behaviors fade both as your tolerance level widens and your reactions don't reinforce the child's behavior. It's helpful to gain practice in selective ignoring in the early years of a child's life to prepare you for the challenges yet to come—accepting teenagers with their unconventional dress and hairstyles, loud music, and moody behaviors.

3. HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN THAT CHOICES HAVE CONSEQUENCES

Experiencing the consequences of their choices is one of the most effective ways children can learn self-discipline. These lessons really last because they come from real life. Most success in life depends on making wise choices. Being able to think ahead about the positive or negative consequences of an action and choose accordingly is a skill we want our children to learn.

Building a child's natural immunity to bad choices

Letting natural consequences teach your child to make right choices is a powerful learning tool. Experience is the best teacher: He's careless, he falls; he grabs something hot, he gets burned; he leaves his bicycle in the driveway, it gets stolen. Wise parents protect their children so they don't get seriously hurt, but do not overprotect to the extent the child doesn't learn the consequences of his folly. Some bruises and scrapes along the way are unavoidable and educational. Children make unwise choices on the way to becoming responsible adults. Children must experience the consequences of their actions in order to learn from them. Within reason and safe limits, let your infant explore, fail, bump, and learn. Expect your preschooler to help clean up his messes. Let your school-age child experience the penalty for not completing homework by bedtime. After years of small inoculations of consequences, the child enters adolescence at least partially immunized against bad choices, having had some genuine experience with decision-making. Children learn better from their own mistakes than from your preventive preaching.

Adolescence

is a time when the consequences of wrong choices are serious. The child who has learned to deal with smallies is more likely to be successful with biggies. Being a wise immunizer means keeping a balance between overprotecting your child and being negligent ("Let him get hurt, he'll learn.") In the first case, the child enters adolescence with little practice at handling inevitable conflicts and risks. In the second case, the child feels no one cares. Either way, there are rough times ahead.

Sometimes the best solution is to offer your child guidance, state your opinion, and then back off and let the consequence teach your child. Use each consequence as a teachable moment, not an opportunity to gloat. Avoid

sentences that begin with "I told you so..." or "If you would have listened to me..." But to be sure that your child learns these little lessons of life, talk through each situation. Replay the tape so that your child gets the point that choices count, and his actions affect what happens. You want your child to realize that he is happier and his life runs more smoothly when he makes wise, though perhaps not easy, choices. Let the consequence speak for itself. The child spills her soda and there's no more soda – without your commentary.

Use logical consequences to correct

Besides letting natural consequences teach your child, you can set up parent-made consequences tailored to have lasting learning value for your child. Here's a logical consequence that parents in our practice tried: "Our son was four-years-old, and we had just moved into a new house. He had gotten a new bedroom set and was feeling very proud and grown up, enjoying his privacy and playing with his friends. When it was time for his friends to leave, and our son became angry and kept slamming the door. I asked him to stop and explained patiently why he shouldn't keep slamming the door. I told him (after thirty minutes) that if this behavior continued, he would no longer enjoy the privacy of a door: "Brett, if you keep slamming the door, I'm going to take it off. (He got this "Yeah, sure, dad's going to take the door off" look of disbelief on his face). For the next three days every time he got a little upset, he slammed the door. So on the fourth day our son went out to play, and when he returned he found his door had been removed from the hinges. But he only noticed it when he went to slam it and it was not there. A week later we put it back. Four years have passed, and he hasn't slammed the door since."

Our then ten-year-old, Erin, treasured her new bike, but now and then she would carelessly leave it overnight on the front sidewalk. We kept reminding her to put her bike in the garage at the end of the day so it wouldn't get stolen, but she still often forgot. So one day we hid the bike. When she got up the next morning, there was no bike. "Perhaps it got stolen?" we offered. Erin was heartbroken; she had already had one bike stolen because she left it out. We gave her time to work through her feelings of loss, guilt, remorse, anger—all the emotions that one has when you blow it and it's your fault. Then we rescued the bike, and Erin. She realized this loss could have been real, and the bike slept safely in the garage thereafter.

For the most learning value, balance negative with positive consequences: The child who frequently practices the piano gets the thrill of moving through his books quickly and receiving hearty applause at his recital. The child who consistently takes care of her bicycle merits a new one when she outgrows it; otherwise, she gets a used one. The child who puts his sports equipment away in the same place each time gets the nice feeling of always being able to find his favorite bat or soccer ball.

In these examples, no amount of punishment could have had the lasting teaching value of natural and logical consequences. With punishment, children see no connection between their behavior and the discipline. With consequences, the child makes the connection between the behavior and the results. You plant a lesson of life: take responsibility for your behavior.

4. MOTIVATORS AND REWARDS

Children and adults behave according to the pleasure principle: behavior that's rewarding continues, behavior that's unrewarding ceases. While you don't have to go to the extreme of playing behavioral scientist, dangling cheese in front of little rats to direct them through the maze, you can invent creative ways to motivate desirable behavior with rewards. Motivators help family life run more smoothly: "First one in bed picks the story."

A word of caution

Prizes are a way to entice your child toward goals you've made for him. The ultimate goal is **self-discipline** – a child behaves because she wants to or because she knows you expect good behavior. She shouldn't expect a prize each time she behaves well. A friend who home-schooled her child until he was eight found that when he entered school as an already a strong reader who was motivated by the pleasure he found in reading, the reward system for reading used by the teacher was not appropriate for him. He made out like a bandit. Slowly his motivation shifted from reading for pleasure to reading for prizes. Ideally, a job well done like reading and finishing a book should be its own reward. Some children may need rewards to get them to read in the first place, but you run the risk that these children will never read for pleasure.

Still, kids are human, and humans go for that chunk of cheese. You do a job well partly because of the rewards you expect to get. If "rewards" or "bribes" offend the moralist in you, call them "motivators." An attachment-parented child is more likely to be motivated by social rewards than by prizes: "This coupon is good for one lunch date with Mommy or Daddy."

To work, a reward must be something your child likes and truly desires. Ask some leading questions to get ideas:

"If you could do some special things with mom or dad, what would they be?"

"If you could go somewhere with a friend, where would you like to go?"

"If you had a dollar, what would you buy?"

Granting privileges and rewards are discipline tools to set limits and get jobs done. "If you hurry and do a good job cleaning your room, you might get finished in time to play outside before dinner."

Rewards that work

The best rewards are ones that are natural consequences of good behavior: "You're taking such good care of your train set. Let's go to the train store and get another boxcar." The natural consequences of good behavior are not always motivating enough in themselves. Sometimes it's necessary to fabricate a reward.

Reward charts

Charts are a helpful way to motivate young children. They see their progress and participate in the daily steps toward the reward. The chart stands out as a testimony of good behavior for all to see. Charts work because they are interactive and fun. Even the business world uses charts as profit motivators. Throughout life many children will be surrounded by performance charts, so they may as well get used to seeing them in their home. When nothing else seems to be working, behavior charts help a child get over the hump of extinguishing an undesirable behavior. As you weed out undesirable behaviors one by one, your child gradually gets used to the feelings that come with good behavior, and these feelings become self-motivating. The need for charting lessens as your child grows, and you will need to find new clutter for your kitchen wall. In making reward charts, consider these tips:

Follow the basic rule: KISMIF – Keep it simple, make it fun.

Work with your child. Let your child help construct the chart and make daily entries.

Construct the chart so that the child has a visual image of closing in on the reward. We have gotten best results from a "connect the dots" chart. Have the child draw a picture of what she wants. Then outline the periphery of the picture with dots several inches apart. With each day of successful behavior (e.g., each time he remembers to take out the trash) the child connects another dot. When all the dots are connected, the child collects the prize.

Display the chart in a high visibility location. (We strategically place ours on the wall along the path between the kitchen table and the refrigerator.) Giving the chart a high profile and high visibility gives the child easy access, serves as a frequent reminder of the desired behavior, and lets her proudly exhibit her progress.

Make the chart interactive: connecting dots, pasting on stickers or different colored stars, anything more interesting than a check mark.

Charts can contain **positive** and **negative** entries, reminders of both types of behaviors. In my office we use daily charts to correct bedwetting in children older than five. The child puts a happy face sticker on the chart every morning he wakes up dry and a sad face sticker on the chart on mornings he wakes up wet. If the happy faces outnumber the sad faces at the end of the week, the child gets to choose where he wants to go for lunch on Saturday.

Keep the time until the prize is collected **short**. Frequent, simple rewards keep motivation high. For a toddler, use end-of-the-hour rewards; for the preschooler, end-of-the-day rewards; for the school-age child, end-of-the-week rewards. A month is an unreachable eternity for any child. For the preschool child, rather than set a calendar time, refer to an event such as "dinner time" or "after Sunday school." Novelty wears off quickly for children. Change charts frequently.

Creative rewards

Besides charts, design your own clever motivators. Because her six-year-old's toy of the month was a doll house, a mother chose a piece of furniture or clothing for the doll as a weekly reward for the child keeping her room tidy. And she related the reward to the behavior: "When you show me you can keep your room tidy, then we'll furnish your doll house." She used periodic reminders: "Let's keep your room as nice as you do your doll house."

To keep order among the seven-to-nine-year-old boys at our twice-monthly Cub Scout meetings, we use the "**good behavior candle**." The object is to burn the candle all the way down so the whole group can have a treat. At the beginning of the meeting we light the candle. The candle stays lit until a disruption occurs. The disrupter has to blow out the candle. The sooner the candle burns down (e.g., the fewer disruptions), the sooner the boys get a prize. Consider what's going on in their impressionable minds. Each time someone snuffs out a candle, they halt the progress toward the prize. Since children don't like to delay gratification, they're motivated to snuff out their own disruptive behavior.

5. REMINDERS

"But I forgot." "But I didn't know I was supposed to." As lame as these excuses sound to adults, children do honestly forget and need reminders to keep their behavior on track.

Reminders are cues that jog the hazy memory of a busy child. They may be subtle prompts in the form of a look that tells the about-to-be-mischievous child, "**You know better**," or a short verbal cue that turns on the child's memory: "**Ah!** Where does that plate belong?" Some situations call for a major reminder and follow through that rings the

child's memory bell loud and clear: "Remember what we've said about running in the street! A car could hit you! You have to look both ways!" (See related topic, Danger Discipline).

Reminders are less likely to provoke a refusal or a power struggle than are outright commands. You have already painted the scene in your child's mind, he knows what you expect, and he has previously agreed to it. Reminders prompt a child to complete a behavior equation on her own. You give a clue and the child fills in the blanks. You stand over a pile of homework sprawled on the floor, then scowl disapprovingly. He gets the message and picks up the homework without you even saying a word.

Written reminders

Go over better with children who don't like to feel controlled. You avoid a face-off. It's up to the child to carry out the reminder in good time to avoid getting a verbal direction. A recent note on Erin's door read, "Please remove the dishes from your room before they start growing things." Frequent reminders of what's acceptable and what's not lets the child know what is normal for your home.

6. THE ART OF NEGOTIATING

Bargaining with your child doesn't compromise your authority. It strengthens it. Children respect parents who are willing to listen to them. Until they leave home, children must accept your authority— that's not negotiable; but that doesn't mean you can't listen to their side of things.

Negotiating is a win-win situation that benefits both parents and children. Parents show that they are approachable and open to another's viewpoint—a quality children become more sensitive about as they approach adolescence. In teen years you will find that negotiating becomes your main behavior management tool, because adolescents like to be treated as intellectual equals and expect you to **respect their viewpoint**. If used wisely, negotiating improves communication between parent and child. A stubborn insistence on having your own way has the opposite effect. "I just can't talk to my dad," said Jessica, a teenager whose father's attitude was "Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up." Even the wishes of a seven or eight-year-old should be open to negotiation. This is a warm-up time to help you sharpen your negotiating skills for the years ahead.

"Why do I have to go to bed at 9 o'clock?" argued ten-year-old Margo. "What time do you think is a good bedtime for you?" asked Father Negotiator. "Ten o'clock," Margo suggested. "That extra hour means a lot to you doesn't it? What would you do during that extra hour?" "I could read," Margo pleaded. "Remember how tired you are the next morning when you stay up late. You fall asleep at school," Father reminded her. "But that was last year, dad. I'm older now," Margo countered. "Yes, I guess you are. Let's try this," Father suggested. "On school nights you must be in bed at nine o'clock and you can read in bed until 9:30. On nights when you don't have school the next day you can stay up until ten o'clock."

The child thought this was acceptable, and her reasoning was validated. The father achieved his goal being sure his child got enough sleep. He knew that after five minutes of reading in bed she would probably fall asleep, which she did. As this volley went back and forth, the father was earning points with his child. The child was getting the message that "I can talk to my dad. He is reasonable, and he really does care about what's good for me. My father listens, and he has some wise things to say."

Sometimes let your child take the lead. Use a well-known negotiating tool: Meet the child where he is, and then bring him to where you want him to be. For example, you want your child to sit and read a book with you, but he's intent on wrestling as evidenced by his grabbing your arm and showing signs that he wants physical play. Let him spend a bit of energy rough-housing on the floor. Tire him out enough so that he can then sit still and read the book. This is not giving into the child or letting the child be in control, it's simply being a smart negotiator. It's a way to bring your child back to your agenda after a short excursion that satisfies the needs of his agenda.

Follow the house rules

Command and exhibit respect during negotiations. If your child starts yelling or acting disrespectful of your authority, close the discussion: "You must not talk to me in that tone, Susan. I'm the mother, you're the child, and I expect respect." This sets the tone for future negotiations. You may have to remind your child of this non-negotiable fact of family life often during the pre-teen and teen years. Because of the constant haggling that older children do, it is easy to let your authority slip away. Don't! You need this authority to keep order in the house, and your child will need to respect authority to get along in life.

There will be situations when you don't want to dicker with your child. You know you're right and your child is being unreasonable. Before the child works himself into a dither, break off the negotiations. That's the parents' prerogative. "That's a no-good rotten TV program, and I've told you before why I am not going to let you watch it. I will not change my mind about this so don't even start on me." Then walk away. Children need to learn when parents mean business. Parents can't use this approach every time or children will see them as tyrants. Be prepared to allow the child to watch other programs that are acceptable.

If used wisely, negotiation can become a valuable communication tool, helping children develop their reasoning abilities. Teach your child that negotiations work best when everyone is calm and peaceful, not in the heat of the moment. "No for now, but I'll talk it over with your dad and get back to you tonight." "I don't like the way you are talking to me. Come back later when you're feeling more peaceful." When you're not sure, or feeling pressured, decide not to decide.

8. WITHDRAWING PRIVILEGES

Withdrawing privileges is one of the few behavior shapers you never run out of. Kids will always want something from you. For this correction technique to have a good chance of preventing recurrence of a misbehavior, the child must naturally connect the privilege withdrawal with the behavior: "If you ride your tricycle into the street, you lose the use of your tricycle for the rest of the day."

Your child dawdles and misses the morning carpool, so he walks to school. This correction technique is commonly used in adult law enforcement: You get caught driving drunk and you lose your license. But this doesn't cure your drinking problem. So you see, withdrawing privileges has its limits as a discipline technique. What does withholding television have to do with being home in time for supper, a child may wonder. Losing privileges can work if it's part of a **pre-agreed behavior management strategy** decided on during a family meeting. Parents state the behaviors they expect from their children and announce that part of the fun of being a parent is granting privileges to the children so they can have some fun too. But if the children don't hold up their end of the bargain, the parents can not grant those privileges. So, being home in time for supper gets you the privilege of a half-hour of TV rather than the TV time being an inalienable right of every citizen of the household. As children get older they need to learn a valuable lesson for life: With increasing privileges come increasing responsibilities.

9. NO NATTERING

"You're picking your nose again." "Watch where you're going." "Late again!" "Can't you do anything right?" Persistent negative comments like these, called nattering, nip away at a child's self-worth. Studies show that nattering does not improve behavior; it actually worsens it. Nattering is especially defeating in children with a poor self-image. Nattering and repeating commands make children nervous. Some children exhibit more than their fair share of negative behavior, but constantly reminding them produces more negative behavior. It is better to purposely pick out some redeeming qualities and concentrate on the positives ("I like the way you stepped aside for your sister"). You will see the negatives melt away. Continuing to talk, or repeating advice that you've previously given, tells the child that you don't trust her to carry out a simple request, such as "Put a load of laundry in, please." If you add a string of qualifiers, you're teaching her you don't trust her to do it right (your way). If you can't stop "advising," start writing notes.

10. HOLDING A FAMILY MEETING

Family meetings are good times to set house rules. You are relaxed and the children are more receptive. Spur-of-the-moment rules ("You're grounded!") made when you are angry are likely to be unfair and unfollowed. Getting together to sort out discipline problems is a valuable way for parents and children to express their concerns. Discipline problems that involve one child should be handled privately, but there are times when all the children get a bit lax in the self-control department and the whole family needs a reminder. Suppose your house is continually a mess. Call a family meeting and invite suggestions from the children on how to keep the house tidy. Use a chalkboard to make it more businesslike. Write down the problem and propose solutions. Put together a "kids want/parents want" list in order to set goals. To avoid chore wars, we assign each child a room to tidy. Then we know who is responsible and who to compliment. Formulate house rules for happier living. Arriving at a general consensus is better than voting, which has winners and losers. Try a suggestion box and have the children write their suggestions on little cards. You'll learn a lot about your living habits that way. I got a suggestion from my teenage daughter: "Daddy, please ask me to help instead of giving orders." You can use family councils to help a child solve a problem. Develop a share-and-care atmosphere. Make the meeting fun. Besides your living room, try other meeting places, such as a family picnic at the park. Meetings shape family behavior and are a forum in which to foster family communication