



COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

ENCOURAGING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

The goal of a Montessori education is to help children develop internal discipline and learn to make the right choices on their own, free from external control. While it can be more challenging, teaching children to consistently use appropriate behaviors has long-term benefits for both the child and the family. Therefore, we model appropriate behavior and allow children the freedom to learn from their mistakes. Consequences should never be punitive; instead, each moment is viewed as a learning opportunity. Young children learn best through natural and logical consequences. Below are some guidelines for encouraging appropriate behavior:

When to Intervene:

It is seldom necessary to intervene immediately. Follow these steps **before** intervening:

1. **Ensure the child is not engaged in purposeful activity**—never interrupt focused activity.
2. **Observe the situation for a few moments** to understand what's happening—don't jump to conclusions (e.g. a child climbing on the counter may simply be trying to get a glass of water).
3. **Think about how you want to address the situation** before intervening.
4. **Decide whether the behavior needs to be addressed right away or if it can be handled later** with a grace and courtesy lesson.
5. **Avoid power struggles**—don't get drawn into a battle of wills.
6. **Always intervene immediately** if a child is harming another person or engaging in destructive behavior.

How to Intervene:

1. **Observe the situation** and plan your approach before intervening.
2. **Approach the child calmly and quietly**—never yell.
3. **Redirect the child** when possible, and address the behavior later in a neutral moment.
4. **Give children the freedom to resolve conflicts** in their own time. Forcing them to address an issue before they're ready often leads to a power struggle.
5. **Resolve conflicts quickly** and with as little adult involvement as possible.

Following Through:

1. **Follow through on any intervention.**
2. **Without follow-through, you risk leaving the child in a tense or unresolved situation.**
3. **Remember, every interaction with a child is a learning opportunity.**
4. **Never tell a child to do something unless you are committed to following through**—make sure your expectations are realistic and achievable.
5. **Following through doesn't always mean staying with the child**—sometimes, it's better to give the child space to make the right choice on their own while you observe from a distance.

EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE TO USE WITH CHILDREN

Use Enforceable Statements:

Use language that helps children avoid getting stuck in a moment of frustration.

- "We can eat breakfast after you put on your socks."
- "I can't wait to read a book with you after you finish cleaning up the puzzle!"

Frame Expectations Using Positive Language:

Avoid negative language like "no" or "don't," which can invite a power struggle. Instead, focus on describing what you want the child to do.

- "Please be gentle with the plants" (instead of "Don't pull the leaves").
- "You may..." (instead of "You have to...").
- "Stop" (instead of "No!") is an actionable word.

Explain the Expectation:

Children may struggle to cooperate simply because they don't understand the reason behind an expectation.

- "It's important to brush your teeth every day to keep them healthy. Bacteria in the mouth can cause cavities."

Be Willing to Compromise:

Model graciousness by listening to your child and collaborating to reach a mutually agreeable solution.

- "I'd be happy to help you put away your train. How about I do the tracks while you put away the cars?"
- "I know you want to wear that dress to school. How about you wear a sweater over it since it's chilly today?"

State the Expectation as a Matter of Fact:

Present rules as simple facts of life instead of commands, helping avoid a power struggle.

- "Glasses are not for throwing—balls are!"
- "Crayons are for coloring on paper, not the walls."

Use "I" Instead of "You" Statements:

Direct commands often lead to power struggles. Instead, use "I" statements to express your role and boundaries.

- "I can't let you hit your brother."
- "I need you to keep your seatbelt on."

Offer a Choice:

Giving children a choice between two acceptable options helps them feel empowered.

- "Would you like to brush your teeth first or take a bath?"

Redirect the Behavior to an Acceptable Outlet:

By observing your child's behavior, you can often redirect them to an appropriate activity.

- "I see you want to dump out water. How about helping me water the plants instead?"

Describe Your Own Feelings:

Model emotional awareness by describing how your feelings are affected by their actions.

- "I feel disappointed that we didn't get to go for a walk after dinner. Tomorrow, I hope we can clean up more quickly so we can go!"

Define the Positive Behavior:

Praise and define positive behaviors to reinforce them, rather than focusing on the negative.

- "I noticed how carefully you played with your sister."
- "You put away your dishes without me asking—that's responsibility!"
- "I see that your body is calm. Now we can read a story."

Remember the Power of Nonverbal Communication:

Sometimes, a gentle touch or a look can be more powerful than words.

- Resting a hand on a child's arm while they're hitting can send a more effective message than speaking.

Help Children Make Amends Instead of Just Apologizing:

Forcing a child to apologize sends the unintentional message that they can right a behavior by simply saying "sorry". There are many opportunities for making amends that involve a more genuine show of concern: getting someone an ice pack, telling them you won't do that again, giving someone space, giving someone a hug. It is also appropriate to model an apology.

- "I'm sorry that you got pushed. I bet that really hurts!"
- "It hurt Natalie when you bit her. Is there anything you can do to make her feel better?"

Take Ownership of Your Own Mistakes:

Children learn best by example. When you own up to your own mistakes, you model responsibility and emotional intelligence.

- "I'm sorry I raised my voice earlier. I was frustrated because we were running late. Next time, I'll give you more notice so you can put on your coat by yourself."

Choose Your Battles:

Not every situation needs to be a battle. Sometimes, the natural consequences of a situation teach more than adult-imposed rules.

- A hungry child who throws food may learn more from going without lunch than from being punished.
- A child who resists using the toilet may learn the consequences of wet pants.
- Don't set limits unless you're ready to follow through.

BEHAVIOR AS A NORMAL PART OF DEVELOPMENT

It's important to remember that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for impulse control and rational thinking, is the last to fully develop. This means that young children often don't yet have the capacity for self-control that adults expect of them.

Children are biologically wired to test limits during their early years. What we sometimes label as tantrums, power struggles, or attention-seeking behavior are actually normal developmental stages. As children go through the process of self-construction, they test different roles, experimenting with behaviors and words to understand the world around them. Through the experience of natural consequences (e.g., "When I scratched my friend, he stopped playing with me" or "When I refused to clean up, we didn't have time for a story"), children learn two valuable lessons: how the world responds to their behavior and how they can begin to regulate their emotions.

Have Reasonable Expectations

Before setting expectations, consider the child's unique capabilities and temperament. For example, an active toddler may not be able to sit still in a restaurant for an extended period. Instead of feeling frustrated, look for ways to set the child up for success in difficult situations (e.g., offering a walk during dinner, bringing toys to engage them, or involving them in conversation).

Change Your Own Perspective

When we recognize that children are not manipulating us with their behavior but are simply acting according to their developmental stage, we can shift our perspective. Instead of seeing these behaviors as something to stop, we can begin to value each moment as an opportunity for learning.

Self-Regulation vs. External Control

Parents often see their children as a reflection of themselves, and as such can be frustrated or embarrassed by their negative behaviors. This can lead to the desire to control behaviors instead of welcoming the opportunity to model and teach self-regulation. External measures like sticker charts, bribes, or punitive methods might work temporarily but don't teach children how to self-regulate. Though it's harder in the moment, investing time to communicate and guide children will ultimately help them develop the internal tools for handling similar situations in the future.

Reactions

We must recognize that we cannot control a child's words or actions, only our own reactions. Instead of trying to control the situation, strive to observe, empathize, and understand. This allows us to help the child learn to take ownership of their own actions and reactions.