

# KID CONNECTS MONTHLY NEWSLETTER: RULES AND DIRECTIVES

## FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT:

Contact our warm line at, (303) 245-4418, to talk directly to an Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant.



As we discussed in our previous newsletter, The Preschool Climate of Healthy Interactions for Learning and Development (CHILD) is a tool for assessing the mental health climate in early childhood care settings. This tool records the quality of interactions in the classroom on a spectrum. This week, we will discuss “Directions and Rules” to better understand how staff manage behavior throughout the classroom by communicating and setting expectations and being consistent in modeling developmentally appropriate rules to guide positive behavior.<sup>1</sup>

It is important that early childhood education (ECE) staff set and enforce clear rules and behavioral expectations to avoid challenging behavior. Research indicates that children need routines, consistency, and structure and that when this is in place they can better learn and grow. When ECE staff are promoting this learning dimension they are communicating clear directions in explicit directives, they are positively framing the expectations, and they are being consistent in an age

appropriate manner. This looks like ECE staff taking advantage of various opportunities to explain rules and provide alternative behaviors and remind children why the rules are there.<sup>2</sup> Some examples of positively framed rules are:

**Do Your Best**

**Be Kind to Others**

**Listen**

**Talk Quietly**

**Walk Slowly**



When the rules are explicit, the teacher is consistent, and consequences are natural and logical, there is little need to repeat the rules often and children are more likely to comply.

On the other hand, when this learning dimension is being undermined it might look like no talk of rules in the classroom or no displayed rules. It could be that the rules are vague and inconsistent, or the rules may be negatively framed, such as “Don’t run” or “No yelling”. This can be confusing for children and not knowing what is expected of them may cause challenging behaviors for preschoolers. Children may think “If I can’t run, what can I do”?

A helpful tool for setting clear expectations in the classroom could include providing visuals for children in the form of rule cards. An example of rule cards is shown below.

<sup>1</sup> Gilliam, W and Reyes, C. 2016. The PreK CHILD draft manual. Preschool climate of healthy interactions for learning and development: an assessment of the preschool mental health climate (draft manual).

<sup>2</sup> Gilliam, W and Reyes, C. 2016. The PreK CHILD draft manual. Preschool climate of healthy interactions for learning and development: an assessment of the preschool mental health climate (draft manual).

We take care of ourselves.



We take care of our school.



We take care of each other.



We take care of our world.



## ENCOURAGING POSITIVE BEHAVIOR

The success of children effectively following rules and directions relies in large part on their caregiver's ability to encourage positive behavior. To promote this, you will need to use proactive strategies, be authentic and

specific in your fostering of positive behaviors. Here are 8 tips for encouraging the behaviors you want to see in young children.<sup>3 4</sup>

1. **Use praise:** Why is praise important? Praise tells children exactly what you like about their behavior and builds their self-esteem and confidence.
2. **Be specific with your praise:** Often we give children vague verbal encouragement, such as “good job” or “thanks friend.” Specific praise tells children exactly what you like, increasing the likelihood they will repeat the same behavior in the future.  
*Example:* “I love watching the two of you take turns. You are being such good friends to one another” Or “Thank you for coming to the table the first time I asked.”
3. **Let children know what they can do/ what you want to see:** When we tell children what we do not want to see we assume that they will do the opposite behavior. Young children have a hard time understanding opposites. So, when we say stop running, they do not know this means they need to walk. Instead, tell them what behavior you want to see.  
*Example,* “Please use your walking feet” or “when we are inside you can use your cat or mouse voice.”
4. **Praise partial compliance:** It is easy for adults to focus on what a child failed to do in a situation. Try to shift your focus to what they did well.  
*Avoid:* “It took me asking you three times to be quiet until you listened at circle time.” *Try:* “I know it was hard for you to turn off your voice and I appreciate you being quiet for the end of circle time.”
5. **Encourage effort, not just outcome:** Children need to know that you see their hard work regardless of the outcome.  
*Example,* “You are being so careful building that tower.”
6. **Give them two positive choices:** Sometimes children struggle to comply because they feel they have no control or feel overwhelmed by options. Two positive choices give them agency and structure, and two outcomes you can live with.  
*Example,* “It’s time to clean up. Do you want to put away the musical instruments or puzzles?”
7. **Catch them being good:** Little children get things wrong all the time because they are just learning. Therefore, they are often corrected. As a result, adults must increase their positive reinforcements to get the right balance. Children need to hear 6 positives for every negative.  
*Example:* “I love how patiently you waited for my attention.” Or “Wow, you cleaned up your lunch without me having to ask!”
8. Remember, it is **not just what you say, but how you say it.** Positive affect and vocal tone make a big difference when interacting with children.



A word about positive incentives: Sometimes caregivers worry that too much that positive encouragement will undermine children’s ability to do what is asked of them, concerned that children will only comply when an incentive is involved. In reality, all behavior is driven by incentives. As adults, we respond well to positive reinforcement. When we have a rough week, we may treat ourselves to a cup of coffee, or if someone at work thanks us for participating in a meeting, we are more likely to talk at the next meeting. Kids are no different. In fact, they need praise even more than adults to help teach them what we accept and appreciate. In time, you can decrease the amount of praising you provide for specific behaviors.

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<sup>3</sup> Webster- Stratton, C. (2005). *The Incredible Years Incredible Years: A Troubleshooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 3 to 8.* Incredible Years.

<sup>4</sup> Raisingchildren.net.au the Australian parenting website. (2011). Praise and encouragement for child behavior. Retrieved from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/connecting-communicating/connecting/praise>.

## BE DIRECT

**What is it?**<sup>5</sup> BE DIRECT is an acronym with a set of 8 effective skills to phrase and give commands. Being direct helps children understand exactly how you expect him or her to behave.

### 1. Be specific with your commands

- It's important to tell children exactly what you want him/her to do
- Specific commands will likely result in getting the desired behavior

*Example:* Instead of "You need to behave.", try, "Please keep your hands to yourself."

### 2. Every command positively stated

- Avoid using No-Don't-Stop-Quit- or Not
- These words cause children to respond negatively, doing instead what you've told them not to do
- Provide a command that tells the child what to do rather than what not to do

*Example:* Instead of "Stop jumping on the couch.", try, "Please put your feet on the ground."

### 3. Developmentally Appropriate

- Provide commands that children are able to follow
- Children are able to understand more as they get older- our expectations for younger children should be different than for older children
- Certain commands may be too difficult for young children

*Example:* a 3-year-old may have difficulty sitting still and paying attention for longer periods of time compared to a 7-year-old

### 4. Individual rather than compound

- Instructions should be given one command at a time rather than stringing several together
- Young children often have attention problems and have a hard time remembering more than one or two commands- In fact, when given instructions some children only recall the first or last thing that you said

*Example:* "Please put the legos back in the box.", praise compliance, "Now please put the books away.", praise compliance

### 5. Respectful and polite

- Start most instructions with the word "please"
- Provides an example of using good manners, models social skills and increases the likelihood that children will listen to commands

*Example:* "It's circle time, please sit down." "Please hand me the blocks."

### 6. Essential commands only

- Adults can spend too much time giving commands- about everything
- When children hear too many commands they are more likely to tune them out because they become overloaded with commands
- Save commands for times when it is important for them to comply

*Example:* "Please take my hand before we cross the street." is more essential than "Please stop tapping your feet."

### 7. Carefully timed explanations



<sup>5</sup> Urquizo, A., Zebell, N., Timmer, S., McGrath, J., & Whitten, L. (2011) Course of Treatment Manual for PCIT-TC. Unpublished Manuscript.

- Children often require a reason or rationale for complying with an adult's command
- Giving the reason before giving the command will reduce the child's attempts to negotiate or delay compliance

*Example:* "It's time to eat lunch. Please come to the table." "We are going outside. Please put on your shoes."

#### **8. Tone of voice is neutral**

- Repeatedly giving commands in a loud, stern voice can be stressful, causing frustration and irritation
- Give all commands in a neutral "matter of fact" manner, avoiding angry, frustrated, pleading or loud tones

### **QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

1. How comfortable are you with setting limits and establishing classroom rules?
2. Are there rules that are easier to reinforce? Are there rules that are harder?
3. What feelings come up for you when a rule is broken? How does that feeling manifest? How is the feeling interpreted by the child?
4. What rules feel necessary? What rules have more flexibility?
5. How are rules and directives communicated in your classroom? Are there multiple modes of communicating rules such as visuals?
6. Think of a time in which a directive was given, and a child followed through on that directive. Why was that interaction successful? What were you doing? What was the child doing?