Guidance and Discipline with Young Children

Developed by the Provincial Child Care Facilities Licensing Board in cooperation with the British Colombia Day Care Action Coalition and the Early Childhood Educators of B.C.

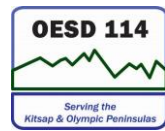First Edition 1990   Revised 1997   2nd Revision 2004

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Introduction

The topic of guidance and discipline is one of interest to a variety of individuals who care for young children, including professional caregivers and parents. Whether the setting is in a Family Child Care Home, a Preschool, a Group Day Care Center, or an Out of School Care Program, an understanding of the basic principles and practices related to guidance and discipline serves as a foundation for inter-reacting successfully with children.

This handbook provides an overview of the attitudes, knowledge, and skills helpful to parents and caregivers in their day-to-day relationships with children. It offers a practical framework with concrete suggestions and examples.

Discipline

Definition
The word "discipline" is derived from the word disciple. It describes the teaching/learning process by which children develop socially acceptable and appropriate behavior as they grow to maturity. Discipline is something that adults do *with* and *for* children, rather than *to* children to stop them from behaving in undesirable ways. Its intention is to help children become self-disciplined as they learn appropriate and acceptable behavior patterns. Discipline involves a *continuous* process of guiding behavior and is offered while appropriate behavior is occurring; as well as before, during, and after inappropriate behavior is displayed.

While there are a wide variety of theories and approaches related to discipline, the goal remains constant—to assist children in developing respect, self-control, self-confidence, self-discipline, and sensitivity in their interactions with others.

Purpose
The purpose of these guidelines is to offer recommended practices for guidance and discipline that are based on a positive, non-punitive approach. It is hoped that these guidelines will assist parents, those who are new to working with children, and serve as a reminder for those with training and experience.

Issues and Considerations
Children's behavior is influenced by their overall development, their environment, and the adults who care for them.

Child Development

Each Child is a Unique Individual
By nature, children differ in terms of their activity level, distractibility, and sensitivity. Parents and caregivers who accept and understand these differences in children's styles will be in a better position to offer effective and appropriate guidance for them.

Children's Behavior Reflects Their Level of Development
When adults recognize that growth entails both experimenting and making mistakes, and that difficulties are a normal, expected part of children's development, they tend to be more tolerant and patient with misbehavior. When adults have an understanding of appropriate developmental issues for children, they are more effective in dealing with them. Caregivers who take the time to offer developmentally appropriate verbal explanations and guidance help children gain confidence, competence, and social problem-solving skills.

Children's Experiences in Their Family and Culture Influences Their Behavior Patterns
Expectations for behavior vary greatly from family to family, and from culture to culture. Some may place a higher value on compliance, dependence, and respect for elders, while others may give priority to risk-taking, assertiveness, and independence. Knowledge about a child's background and respect for different value systems will help caregivers respond sensitively to varying child rearing approaches.

In summary, adults who appreciate these principles of child development will develop attitudes and practices, which are based on realistic expectations of children's needs and abilities.

Environment

The environment refers to all that surrounds a child. It includes the elements of people, space, time and things.

People- (Adults and Children)
Adults who are committed to nurturing and guiding young children create an atmosphere which fosters trust, security, and comfort. Communication skills are critical in modeling the behavior they wish children to learn. When children are in an environment that encourages caring and cooperative relationships, they learn to relate with each other in positive ways.

Space
The way in which space is used can either encourage or discourage desired behavior. Where space is sufficient, children can play and work in a relaxed setting. Where areas are specifically

designated for adults or children, and/or for individuals or groups, conflict is minimized. In short, space which is aesthetically pleasing, ordered, and organized contributes to an environment which promotes good mental health and diminishes the potential for problems.

Time
Schedules, routines, and transitions serve as a framework from which children gain trust, security and order. While these can be flexible to some degree, they must provide children with clear guidelines about what is expected. Meeting children's need throughout the day requires that time be appropriately balanced between active and restful periods, individual and group activities, and child initiated/adult initiated content.

Things
When toys and materials are in good supply, familiar, and developmentally appropriate, children are encouraged to focus and become involved in productive learning experiences. Caregivers who are knowledgeable about the ways in which environments influence behavior can plan their settings accordingly. With groups of infants and toddlers, providing duplicates of favorite toys is essential.

Guidance Strategies: Prevention

The following strategies are *prevention oriented.* They "set the stage" for a positive atmosphere and maximize opportunities for desirable behavior.

Establish Clear, Consistent, and Simple Limits
Limits are statements of what behavior is appropriate. They ensure children know what is expected. Limits should be clearly related to the safety and protection of self, others, and the environment. They should be few in number, consistently enforced, and within the child's ability to understand. For example:

- "Inside we walk."
- "Chairs are for sitting on."
- "Hands must be washed before we eat."

Offer Straightforward Explanations for Limits
When children understand the reasons or rationale for limits, they are more likely to comply and abide by them. Furthermore, teaching children the "why" of a limit helps them internalize and learn the rules of social living. For example:

- "The sand needs to stay down low so that it doesn't get into people's eyes."
- "When you put the toys back on the shelf, people can find them easily when they want them."

State Limits in a Positive, Rather than a Negative

Phrasing limits in a positive way focuses on what *to do*, rather than what *not to do*. When parents and caregivers offer these positive statements, they reinforce for children what is appropriate, serve as desirable models of communication for children to imitate, and decrease the likelihood for children to respond with defensiveness or resistance. For example:

- "It's time to put the blocks away."
  Rather than:
  > "Don't leave the blocks on the floor."

- "Turn the pages gently."
  Rather than:
  > "Don't be rough with that book."

Focus on the Behavior, Rather than on the Child

Messages which focus on "You always…." or "You never…." may be perceived by a child as attacking and critical. They tend to produce feelings of guilt and shame and can ultimately result in lowering a child's self-esteem. When caregivers focus on a child's *behavior,* rather than on a child's character, they preserve a child's integrity and other positive guidance for learning. For example:

- "When you grab the truck, it makes Sam angry."
  Rather than:
  > "You should be ashamed of yourself for grabbing the truck."

- "It's not safe to climb on tables."
  Rather than:
  > "You naughty boy."

State what is Expected, Rather than Pose Questions

In matters of routines, limits, and expected behaviors, it is important to *state*, rather than to *ask.* Posing questions implies that the child has a choice. While there are many opportunities for children to make choices, offer these options *only* when they are appropriate. When there is not a choice, make a clear statement of what is expected. For example:

- "It time to tidy up now."
  Rather than:
  > "Do you want to tidy-up?"

- "Your mommy is here. It's time to go home."
  Rather than:
  > "Do you want to go home now?"

Provide Choices
Providing choices is also a valid prevention strategy for young children, which often avoids power struggles. For excample:

- "Do you want to put your pants on first, or your shirt?"
  Rather than:
     "Get dressed now."

Allow Time for Children to Respond to Expectations
Children react more favorably when they are offered cues and warnings. This helps them to anticipate or prepare for change. Instead of demanding immediate results, parents and caregivers should be prepared to give children time to respond. For example:

- "In a few minutes, it will be time to clean up."
  Rather than:
     "Get that cleaned up now."

- "When the bell goes, off it will be Jaleel's turn on the computer."
  Rather than:
     "Give Jaleel the computer now, it's his turn."

Reinforce Appropriate Behavior, with Both Words and Gestures
When children are doing well, it is important to acknowledge this through words or gestures. Positive reinforcement helps children build self-confidence and encourages them to repeat desired behaviors. In using this strategy, adults should again take care to focus on the specific *behavior*, rather than on the *child*. For example:

- "It was really kind of you to share that with Kathy."
  Rather than:
     "You're a good girl."

- "When you tidy-up so well, it makes our room look great."
  Rather than:
     "You're my best helper."

- "You look really proud of your work."
  Rather than:
     "I am really proud of you."

Ignore Minor Incidents
Adults who work with young children need to develop tolerance for a certain amount of noise, clutter, and attention-seeking behaviors. As long as children's activities are not infringing on the rights of others, it is often best to "take a breather" rather than to speak.

Encourage Children to Use You as a Resource
Children feel a greater sense of comfort and trust when they know that the caregiver or parent is there to protect, guide, and help them. When children learn that the adult is willing to listen and respond in a fair and a supportive manner, their security and control increases. For example:

- "If you're not sure what to do, ask, and I'll help you."
  Rather than:
  > "That's hard for you, I'll do it."

- "I'll stand beside you while you ask Carlos if you can join in."
  Rather than:
  > "Don't be silly, talk to Carlos yourself."

Scan
When adults observe children in their activities, they are in a better position to anticipate potential difficulties and step in to prevent problems.

Proximity
Often, it is necessary to stay close by when younger children are still learning to play together.

Guidance Strategies: Intervention

While the preceding strategies will help to create a positive climate and minimize behavior problems, there will be inevitable occurrences of inappropriate behavior. At these times, adults will need to step in or intervene. The following intervention strategies will help ensure that guidance is supportive, rather than punitive.

Gain a Child's Attention in a Respectful Way
Apart from situations where physical danger is imminent, adults should approach children individually, state their name, establish eye contact, and use a calm, controlled voice.

Use Proximity and Touch
In situations where children may be losing self-control, the closeness of an adult can often help them re-establish it. Simply moving close to a child, moving between two children, putting an

arm around a child, or holding a child on the caregiver's lap can serve as effective guidance and intervention. This may be a helpful strategy when dealing with biting, pinching, kicking or thrashing.

Remind

To clarify and reinforce limits, simple reminders are helpful to young children. Because toddlers and preschoolers have short memories and become distracted easily, caregivers must be prepared to remind often. For example:

- "The bikes stay on the bike path."
- "Remember what happened yesterday when people where running around the room."
- "Sand stays down."

Acknowledge Feelings before Setting Limits

In order that children perceive adult guidance as supportive, it is important for them to know that their feelings are recognized and understood. When limits are preceded by an acknowledgement of feelings, children will be less likely to respond in a negative way. For example:

- "You look really angry, but I cannot let you hurt Scott."
- "It's hard to wait for your turn, but the rule is that we line up for the slide."

With toddlers, often just acknowledging the feeling is enough. Their short attention span needs to be taken into account.

Redirect or Divert When Appropriate

This can be an effective strategy with children whose attention span and verbal abilities are limited. With upset toddlers or very young preschoolers, offering a substitute toy or engaging them in some other activity may quickly resolve problems or conflicts. As children mature; however, this strategy is less desirable, since it "sidesteps" children's involvement in problem solving and does not help them learn alternate approaches to situations.

Model Problem-Solving Skills

When children face discouraging or frustrating situations, it is natural for them to lose control. As parents and caregivers anticipate this, they can offer verbal and/or physical assistance which models problem solving.

A starting point in providing coping skills is to *acknowledge the problem.* For example:

- "I can see there is a problem. Tim has the bike, and you want it."
- "It's frustrating when the blocks won't balance."

Following a statement of the problem, it may be appropriate to pose *helpful questions.* For example:

- "Have you asked Tim to give you the bike when he's finished?"
- "What would you happen if you put the big block on the bottom?"

If further guidance is necessary, state a solution or *physically demonstrate.* For example:

- "Tell him that you would like to use the bike when his turn is over."
- "Put the biggest blocks on the bottom, like this."

When a situation has been resolved, it is helpful to *summarize* for older children. For example:

- "Next time, you can try to remember how we solved the problem."
- "You thought you couldn't do it, but now you've learned that you could."

The intent of modeling a problem-solving approach is to provide resources for overcoming obstacles to success. Whether the problem relates to working with materials or interacting with others, following the steps of problem-solving helps children learn the process involved. As children become more familiar and experienced with this process, they can be encouraged to generate suggestions or alternatives of their own.

Offer Appropriate Choices
When clarifying expectations or reinforcing limits, caregivers can offer a simple choice. The choice should be posed in non-threatening and non-punitive ways. For example:

- "You can sit quietly at the circle, or you can go choose a puzzle. You decide."
- "Do you want to wait there for your turn, or do you want to find something else to do?"

Use Natural and Logical Consequences
A statement of *natural* consequences simply clarifies the inevitable or unavoidable outcome of a behavior. For example:

- "When you forget to put your picture on the shelf, we can't find it at going home time."

A statement of *logical* consequence clarifies an adult-arranged outcome of behavior. For example:

- "When you cannot remember the rules about playing with water, you need to find something else to do."

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- "Yes, I can see that the paint spilled. Here is a sponge for wiping it up."

Redirect
This strategy involves changing the circumstances which are causing unwanted behavior. When adults redirect children's activity, they assume responsibility for solving a problem which children have been unable to resolve through other guidance strategies. As much as possible, children should be redirected to activities which are in line with their needs. For example:

- "I can see you really need to be outside, let's get our coats."

Limit the Use of Equipment
Redirecting often goes hand in hand with removing a piece of equipment from a child's play options. This strategy should be used sparingly and only when other strategies have proven unsuccessful. For example:

- "Since you are having trouble remembering the rules for using the piano, I'm going to close it for now."
- "The climbing frame is 'off limits' now because the climbers are not listening to the safety rules."

Holding Techniques (Training Required)
In rare situations, holding a child may be an effective strategy. Where a child's loss of control and the ability to reason causes him or her to become a safety hazard to him/herself or others, a caregiver may assist the child in re-establishing control through this technique. At this time, caregivers can hold the child with *just* sufficient strength to protect the child or other children. The intent of this strategy is to soothe the child and to keep them and others safe until self-control is regained. Here again, the calm and controlled attitude of the adult is critical in ensuring that this strategy is supportive, not punitive. Apart from a few comforting phrases, adults should refrain from conversation during this time.

Provide Opportunities for Children to Make Amends
Rather than demand a superficial apology, adults should offer genuine opportunities for children to restore relationships after an incident of hurt or harm. While children may not be immediately ready to "take" these opportunities, they should be suggested nonetheless. Ultimately, the goal of this strategy is to help children learn that making amends requires time and good will, rather than revenge. For example:

- "Sharon doesn't feel ready to play with you yet, because she's still upset. Let's give her a little time."
- "Maybe you could help by getting Michael a Kleenex while I get a Band-Aid. No? Okay, maybe you just feel like being alone for a while."

Summary

In most instances of guidance and discipline, adults are encouraged to *combine approaches* or use *several strategies* as they respond to children's' behavior. For example, if a child seems reluctant to eat, the adult might say:

- "I know you don't want to clean up but it's time for lunch."
  (Acknowledge feelings before setting limits)

If the child continues to resist, the adult might say:

- "You can put away the blue blocks or the red ones, you decide."
  (Offer appropriate choices)

If the child refuses to clean up at this point, the adult might say:

- "I can see you really want to continue with the building, let's put away 10 blocks so there is room to nap and move this over here, we can continue with it later."
  (Redirection)

It is important to remember that no one strategy will be effective in every situation, or with every child. At different levels of development, strategies must vary. However, the more options for guidance and discipline that caregivers have to choose from, the more successful they will be in meeting the challenge of living and working with young children.