

## CHANGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

Childhood behaviour can be broadly grouped into two categories - good behaviour and bad behaviour. Usually parents are most concerned with bad behaviour and try to deal with this problem by spanking or punishments. If these techniques worked, they would be fine but many parents are frustrated because punishments or spankings, by themselves, do not work. Also, spankings frequently cause both parents and children to lose their tempers which can lead to physical abuse.

Why do children have "bad behaviour", behaviours such as sulking, hitting other children, lying, temper tantrums, playing with matches and "not listening"? There are many reasons but some of the most common are:

- 1) **To get attention**  
Children love attention. It makes them feel loved, secure, and confident. If children do not get enough attention for good behaviour, they will get this attention with bad behaviour.
- 2) **The rules governing behaviour are not clear, or are inconsistently enforced**  
Children need to know clearly what the rules of behaviour are and to have these rules enforced regularly, firmly and consistently. With no rules and no enforcement, children not only behave poorly but worry excessively and feel unloved.
- 3) **Children feel badly about themselves or their families**  
Children do not have the emotional vocabulary to talk about their feelings - if they feel badly or upset, they show this through bad behaviour. Common reasons why children may feel insecure, unloved, or unhappy are poor school performance, teasing from other children, family problems such as divorce or separation, or perceived second-rate status often seen in adopted, foster or step-children.

Sometimes parents are unsure of whether their children have "bad behaviour" or just normal behaviour. Many times parents do not know what behaviour to expect from their children especially if it is the oldest child or an only child. Because I see many children with many kinds of behaviour, I will let you know if you are worried about behaviour which I think is relatively normal.

### BEFORE YOU START

Regardless of the cause, there are some proven methods to help children improve their behaviour. To begin with, any major underlying problems such as learning disorder, difficulty with focussing attention in school or family problems must be dealt with. These are the issues I can help you and your child with.

## CHANGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

**By far the most effective way of decreasing bad behaviour is to increase good behaviour.**

It is important to identify the behaviour, not the child, as good or bad. The basis of changing children's behaviour is letting your child know that you have "unconditional love" for them. This means getting your child to understand that he or she is a good child and that you love them regardless of their behaviour. Even when they have bad behaviour, you should let the child know that you do not like their behaviour, but you still love them. If you have concerns that this may be difficult for you, please ask me to discuss this some more with you.

Another base line rule is that the parents or parent figures must be in agreement with:

- (1) What behaviours are important to change,
- (2) What rules are important, and
- (3) What good behaviours are to be encouraged.

Parents should ideally be equally committed, consistent, and capable of dealing with their children in order to really effectively change their behaviour. Obviously a simmering marital problem, alcohol abuse, or one parent feeling depressed may make this cooperation difficult. Again, if you have concerns about this, please ask me. I should also add that single parents can be just as effective in helping improve their children's behaviours, although it may take more effort than with two parents.

Whatever the parenting or family situation, it takes time, energy and enthusiasm to change the way your child behaves. The pay off is that the frustration, anger or hopelessness which parents experience from bad behaviour is reduced, and the negative interactions you are having with your child can be replaced by positive ones.

### Encouraging Good Behaviour

As I mentioned, the most useful way to decrease bad behaviour is to increase good behaviour. The practical steps to do this are

- 1) Identify specifically what behaviours you would like your child to do (eg. "Wash the dishes at supper time 3 days a week") Asking your child simply to be good is much too general. Asking your child not to do something (eg "Don't talk back"), also will not work for this program. Make a list of 4-5 behaviours which you want to encourage.
- 2) Design a "Star Chart" so your child can see what is expected and so that you can encourage the good behaviour. Please see the example on the next page

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**MICHAEL'S STAR CHART**

**WEEK OF:     MAY 7, 1995**

**# OF STARS FROM LAST WEEK:**

	SUN.	MON.	TUES.	WED.	THURS.	FRI.	SAT.
Walk the dog by 6 pm							
Cut the grass by 5 pm (3 stars) on Saturday	•••••	•••••	•••••	•••••	•••••	•••••	
Pick up toys in playroom before bed time							
Make the bed by 7:30 pm							
One hour of homework 7 - 8 pm							
<b>25 STARS = 1 PACKAGE OF HOCKEY CARDS</b>							

Notice in the example that Michael is expected to walk the dog 7 days per week, cut the grass on Saturday, pick up toys before bed time each day, make the bed 7 days per week, and do one hour of homework, Monday through Thursday. Note that most of the chores must be completed by a certain time. This makes it easy to check on the task and also teaches the child time management skills. Also some tasks that are more difficult can be given more stars, such as 3 stars for cutting the grass.

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- 3) As parents you must closely monitor your child's performance. Your response to your child for completing his job must be prompt and consistent. The best response is to show some affection and attention (a hug, saying, "Thank you for making your bed.") and to place a star on the Star Chart. Try to avoid nagging and arguments or threats to get your child to complete a behaviour.
- 4) In addition to getting stars, there should be some extra reward, known as a secondary reinforcer, for getting lots of stars. Let your child know that for getting 15 stars (range 10-20), she or he will get an extra treat. This reward should be relatively inexpensive and one which you are prepared to give several times per week. (Examples: hockey cards, stickers, pogs, colouring book, going to McDonald's, etc.) Whatever the treat is, it should only be given for getting a certain number of stars and should not be given at any other time. In the example, Michael gets a package of hockey cards for each 15 stars.

## PRACTICAL HINTS

- 1) Each young child in the family should have a Star Chart. This avoids fighting and jealousy by treating your children equally.
- 2) A different colour of star should be used for each child.
- 3) Display the charts in a prominent place (Example: refrigerator door) and encourage visitors and relatives to see how many stars your child is getting. Usually children want to show off their Star Charts.
- 4) Use a new chart every week, but carry over the numbers of stars from last week.
- 5) Both parents must be in agreement with this program and be willing to monitor the behaviours and give out the stars and encouragement.
- 6) Do not feel you have to limit your positive comments to your child to the behaviours on the chart. Every time you see your child doing something you approve of, do not lose the opportunity to compliment them, give them a hug, or let them know you approve. **Catch your child being good.**

## EXPECTATIONS

The vast majority of children will respond to using Star Charts if the parents have "unconditional love" for their child and are consistent with monitoring the stars. However, changing behaviour is a slow process and you must be prepared to think in terms of months, not days or weeks. After all, it took years for your child to develop their current behaviour. Also, progress tends to be erratic with "two steps up and one step back", so be prepared for bad days or a bad week.

Also remember the goal, to increase good behaviour and decrease bad. No child will have good behaviour 100% of the time.

Please bring your children's Star Charts to your next appointment with me. Do not go on and try to deal directly with bad behaviours until you have seen me again.

## DISCOURAGING BAD BEHAVIOUR

After encouraging good behaviour for two weeks, you will be getting some positive results from using the Star Chart, and it is time to consider dealing directly with bad behaviour. Bad behaviour can be roughly divided into two groups

- 1) Annoying behaviour
- 2) Very bad, or dangerous behaviour

- (Reasons for Bad Behaviour)*
- 1) ADHD.
  - 2) to get att'n
  - 3) Rules are not clear or not enforced
  - 4) 121 - They feel badly about themselves or their family.

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Some examples of annoying behaviour are whining or arguing. Examples of very bad or dangerous behaviour are temper tantrums or hitting younger children.

Sit down and make two lists of your child's bad behaviours. Please bring this list with you to your next appointment.

## ANNOYING BEHAVIOUR

*You have to practice time out.*

The best way of dealing with annoying behaviour is to ignore it and pay no attention at all. This sounds easy but actually is very hard because children will do their best to get you to pay attention to annoying behaviour. When you start to use this technique, expect your child's behaviour to temporarily get worse. Do not scold, argue or show any anger over these behaviours. This is a very difficult job for most parents. I can tell you that if you are consistent with ignoring it, most annoying behaviour (which is designed to get your attention) will disappear.

## VERY BAD OR DANGEROUS BEHAVIOUR

From your list of these behaviours, select the 3 or 4 that you would like to concentrate on getting rid of.

Research has shown that the best way to discourage bad behaviour is to use a "Time Out" system. This approach is used successfully in hospitals to help children with terrible behaviour, so it should work for your child. This is more effective than spanking, scolding, or sending children to their rooms because it removes "attention" from your child.

## PRACTICAL ADVICE ON TIME OUT SYSTEM

- 1) Make a list of the 3-4 behaviours for which your child will get a "Time Out". Make sure your child understands the list and the "Time Out" system.
- 2) Have a small chair available in a corner of your kitchen or a hall - a place where you can supervise the time out.
- 3) When your child engages in one of the bad behaviours, ask them to stop. If they do within 15 seconds, that is fine. If not, immediately announce that he or she is getting a time out and lead them over to the chair. Be sure to tell them why they are getting the time out.
- 4) The child is expected to sit on the chair and remain silent for 3 minutes. You must supervise to make sure your child remains on the chair and is not bothered or teased by other brothers, sisters or friends. An egg timer, clock or stove timer should be available so your child has an idea that time is passing.
- 5) At the end of 3 minutes the only expectation is that your child must identify the bad behaviour for which they got a time out. Do not try to get them to apologize or promise never to do it again. If they refuse to identify the behaviour, they get one more 3 minute "Time Out" and then you should tell them what the bad behaviour was.

Just as with the Star Chart, promptness and consistency on the part of the parents is essential. Again, in two-parent families, both parents must be willing and able to enforce "Time Outs".

## SOME PROBLEMS

- 1) **Bad Behaviour Out of the Home.** Children have an uncanny ability to engage in bad behaviour at the worst time in the worst place. For example, Melissa liked to pull down displays of cans at the grocery store when her mother was checking out. You must be prepared to be prompt and consistent even here. Usually I suggest taking your child to your car, and giving them "Time Out" there. Try not to be embarrassed or inhibited with using "Time Out" simply because you are in a public place. Your child must learn that you will be consistent regardless of where you are.

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- 2) **Aggressive Behaviour.** Especially when trying to deal with temper tantrums, your child may refuse to cooperate, or may try to hit you. In this case, you should sit on the chair yourself and hold your child in your lap for the "Time Out". After several struggles like this, most children learn to cooperate with "Time Outs". Obviously, this may not work for a large, powerful older child. If you are concerned about this problem, please ask me about it
- 3) **Dealing with Relatives and Friends.** Sometimes friends or relatives will give you conflicting advice on how to manage your children, or worse, will actively interfere with the behaviour modification programs that you are using. Also, many parents whose children have behavioral problems will not go to friends' or relatives' houses with their children in order to avoid embarrassment. The way to deal with both of these problems is to be straightforward. Let them know that you have received professional advice on how to change your child's problem behaviours. Assert your authority as parents, but at the same time, ask for their cooperation and understanding. Explain that consistency and promptness are important and that you may have to stop abruptly to give your child a start or a "Time Out". If problems persist, please speak to me. Sometimes it helps if you bring relatives or friends to my office so that I can explain how they can help.

### SUMMARY:

The best way to encourage good behaviour and to change bad behaviour is a combination of positive reinforcement ("Star Charts"), no reinforcement ("ignoring"), and negative reinforcement ("Time Outs"). Of the three, positive reinforcement is the most powerful - so use Star Charts for two weeks before using ignoring or Time Outs. Promptness and consistency on your part are essential. Remember it takes months, not days, to teach children how to change. I can tell you, however, that your efforts will be rewarded by better behaviour from your child, and, more importantly, a more positive relationship between you and your child.

## CHANGING BEHAVIOUR FOR TEENAGERS

Teenage behaviour can be more challenging than children's however the principles remain the same. Some of the specific changes are:

- 1) The Star Chart should be renamed "the Job List" and the teen should be the one to check off the jobs as they are completed.
- 2) Rules, rewards and consequences must be "negotiated" between the parents and the teenager.
- 3) Both rewards and consequences should revolve around "privileges", the worse consequence being "grounding" on a weekend.
- 4) Don't get involved with rules you can't enforce. "No smoking in the house" can be enforced. "No smoking at any time" is unenforceable and should not be a rule.
- 5) Rewards and consequences do not have to be as immediate as they do for children but they must continue to be consistent and predictable.
- 6) If there is any physical violence between parents and teens the appropriate action is to call the police.

21. Tape record your child when he/she throws a temper tantrum, let him/her listen to the tape, and discuss the reaction to the tape.

22. Show your child how to control angry feelings when things do not go his/her way (e.g., count to 10, say the alphabet, etc.).

23. Immediately remove your child from the attention of others when throwing a temper tantrum.

24. Make certain you do not "give in" to your child's temper tantrums because others are present. Maintain consistency at all times.

25. Remind your child of the consequences of throwing a temper tantrum before going into a grocery store, shopping mall, friend's house, etc.

26. Make certain that your child does not go to another adult after you have said "no."

27. After telling your child that he/she cannot do or have something, explain the reason.

28. Offer another suggestion to your child after you have said "no" to something (e.g., if your child wants to spend the night at someone else's house and cannot do that, suggest that your child have the friend come to your house; if your child wants a new toy but cannot get one, suggest getting it for a birthday or earning it for good behavior, etc.).

29. Be consistent in expecting your child to ask for things and react to disappointment without throwing a temper tantrum. Do not "give in" one time and expect appropriate behavior the next time.

30. Make certain your child knows beforehand what to expect in various situations (e.g., how much money to spend at the store, how long your child can visit a friend, when to come home, etc.).

31. If your child throws a temper tantrum about such things as not getting to go to a movie or not getting a new toy, have him/her earn such items/activities for appropriate behavior. Do not "give in" to your child if he/she is throwing a temper tantrum.

32. Separate your child from peers who throw temper tantrums when they do not get their own way.

33. Make certain that baby-sitters, grandparents, teachers, etc., understand the importance of maintaining consistency in discipline with your child.

34. Encourage your child to use problem-solving skills: (a) identify the problem, (b) identify goals and objectives, (c) develop strategies, (d) develop a plan for action, and (e) carry out the plan.

35. Teach your child alternative ways to communicate unhappiness (e.g., talking about a problem, asking for help, etc.).

36. Reduce the emphasis on competition. Repeated failure may cause your child to throw temper tantrums.

37. Provide your child with alternative activities, games, etc., in case some activities prove upsetting.

38. Give your child additional responsibilities (e.g., chores, errands, privileges, etc.) so that there will be alternative activities if your child does not get to do what he/she wants.

39. Discourage your child from engaging in those activities which cause unhappiness.

40. Avoid those situations which are likely to stimulate your child's temper tantrums (e.g., highly competitive activities, extreme disappointment, quarreling with brothers and sisters, etc.).

41. Intervene early when your child begins to get upset in order to prevent a tantrum from getting out of control (e.g., take your child out of the store, leave the checkout line, etc.).

**A Reminder: Your child will stop throwing temper tantrums in order to get his/her own way if you do not "give in" to the tantrums.**

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