

EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE

Best Practices

for Guiding
Children's Behaviour



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Who will benefit?

This guide is for early learning and child care staff and family child care providers. It provides effective ways to guide behaviours and enhance the social and emotional well-being of all children in your care. The strategies described here are research-based. They can help all children, not just those experiencing difficulties.

Where do I begin?

You set the tone for experiences that children have while in your care. Therefore, it is important to develop a respectful, caring relationship with every child, right from the start. This allows children to build trust in you.

Get to know each child and what may be affecting her behaviour. Observe children carefully and pay attention to the environment where specific behaviours are happening. For example: Do children have to wait for the whole group before leaving the lunch table or using the washroom?

Are they expected to stop playing without notice and change activities often? Do children and adults have to shout to hear each other over background music?

These observations will help you adapt your approach and increase positive behaviours. Listen carefully, look at each situation from a child's perspective and determine what changes you need to make.

When we are uncomfortable with a child's behaviour, it can be difficult to respond appropriately and effectively. It is important to know when we are losing control; recognize our own discomfort; and discuss it with supportive team members. Because every situation is different, behaviour guidance requires ongoing decision making. We need to remember to be patient, even if a strategy does not work in a particular situation. We need to be flexible and try other strategies that may fit the situation better. Sometimes we need to use a strategy for a longer period of time, before we see improvement.

What can I do to encourage positive social interactions?

Strategy	Practice
Seek many opportunities to interact with each child and give individual attention .	Snuggle up and read a book together; ask questions and begin a conversation with a quiet child; join in active play with an energetic child.
Role play examples of appropriate behaviours to teach children how to succeed in social interactions.	Give children scenarios such as “What if you want a toy that someone else is using?” Discuss possibilities and help children try out their ideas. For example: “Can I use that puzzle when you’re done?”
Read books about feelings and discuss them with children.	“Look at her face in this picture, she seems happy. Do you remember feeling this way? What happened to make you feel this way?”
Use words you want the children to use to model appropriate social behaviours.	Ask: “Can I play with you?” before you join children in their play.
Watch closely for positive behaviours and tell children when their language and behaviour is appropriate. Make positive comments more often than negative ones.	“I noticed you zip up your friend’s jacket. That helped her get ready for outdoor play sooner. Thank you.”
Be specific with feedback when giving attention, so children understand what behaviour is appropriate.	Try: “The two of you were so helpful working together to bring chairs to the table.” instead of “Good job.”
Help children develop a short list of basic rules to follow during daily interactions and activities.	Ask: “How should we care for ourselves, our friends and our toys?”
Post the list of rules with pictures to illustrate them, where children can see them easily.	Include photos of the children showing respect for themselves, for others and for toys.

What can I do to discourage inappropriate behaviours?

Strategy	Practice
Recognize that inappropriate behaviours present opportunities for children to develop language and social skills.	Give a cue or phrase, so children can communicate their needs and wants more appropriately.
Have realistic expectations for each child. Ensure that expectations are appropriate for the development and abilities of each child and that they respect individual social and cultural backgrounds.	Remind younger children to use “gentle touches” instead of hitting. Help older children understand the perspective of others by asking: “How do you think hitting made him feel? How can you make him feel better?”
Break tasks into smaller steps that the children can manage.	During cleanup time, ask children: “Please put three toys on the shelf.” rather than “Put your toys away.”
Offer help if a child seems frustrated with a task.	Ask: “Can I help you with your zipper?”
Use positive language that focuses on the expected behaviour.	Provide a reminder: “Please walk.” instead of “Don’t run!”

Ignore minor incidents when there is no concern for safety, to avoid attention on inappropriate behaviour.	For example, do not acknowledge that a child throws a blanket if the child settles for a nap afterwards. Do not acknowledge that a child slams a game piece on the table when frustrated, but continues to play the game calmly.
Provide logical reasons when stating limits.	Try: "Please use a quieter voice so I can hear what you are saying" instead of "Stop shouting!"
Re-state the message differently, if the child does not seem to understand what is expected.	First try: "Take your things to your locker." Then try: "Hang your snow pants and coat on your hook."
Use a calm, encouraging tone of voice that expresses your confidence in the child's ability to stay calm and solve a problem.	Show a positive attitude: "I know you can do it!"
Use positive body language and facial expressions to convey support.	Keep arms relaxed, rather than on hips. Smile instead of frowning.
Respond consistently so children have many opportunities to practise what is expected of them.	If children are expected to mop up spills at the water table, remind them each time, if needed. Avoid doing it for them, even when it may be faster.
Model techniques to help children learn to calm themselves when they are upset.	Allow children to see you express and deal with different emotions. "I'm feeling frustrated. I'm going to take the time to calm down by counting to 10."
Wait until children are calm before speaking with them.	Quiet, relaxing time in a cozy area can be comforting until they are ready to communicate and solve the problem.
Ensure strategies are consistent among all staff members. Review and discuss program philosophy and the behaviour guidance policy regularly.	Review policies and add discussion about guiding behaviours to the staff meeting agenda, at least twice a year.

What should I consider when planning the schedule, transition times and daily experiences?

Strategy	Practice
Provide large blocks of time each day for uninterrupted free play. This allows children to become fully involved in meaningful experiences.	Children have at least 45 to 60 minutes of self-chosen free play indoors and outdoors throughout the day, to initiate and sustain their play.
Offer children play choices , based on their individual interests.	Try: "I know how much you like to explore. Would you like to hunt for treasures in the sand table?" rather than "Find a place to play."
Get to know each child and her interests, so you can redirect them to an appealing alternative activity, if needed.	A child who enjoys sensory experiences is more likely to be successful, if offered activities such as play dough, textured art materials or sand and water play.
Use visuals to communicate expectations to children.	Label toy bins with pictures or photos of items that belong there.

Minimize the number of transitions during the day to reduce the amount of times children must change activities.	Provide an optional staff-led activity during free play and allow children to come when ready and to leave when finished.
Give notice before there is a change in activity. Avoid abrupt interruptions so children can prepare for the transition.	Try: “When we are finished singing, it will be time to play outside.” Then try: “After this song, we will put on our sun hats for outdoor time.”
Give jobs to older children to help with the transition.	Have older children set the snack table or help younger children put on their shoes.
Make transitions consistent and fun so children know what to expect and stay interested.	Use songs, rhymes and finger plays to signal a change in activity.
Reduce the amount of time children are waiting with nothing to do.	Provide a bin of books or toys for children to use while waiting for others to finish getting dressed for outdoor play.
Avoid having children participate in activities as one large group. Stagger routines and transitions.	Provide lunch for a group of young children first. Have them settle for a nap or quiet play, while older children begin their lunch.
Provide short, teacher-led group experiences for older, preschool and school age children.	Make group time a come-and-go activity. Keep length under 10 minutes for preschool children. Lengthen only for those who are engaged. Avoid teacher-led whole group times with infants and toddlers.
Encourage children to seek help from peers who can model useful skills and appropriate behaviours.	Provide a partner for a child who has difficulty with transitions.
Have a consistent schedule that is predictable but flexible.	The sequence of events should be the same each day, but expect to adjust the timing to meet children’s needs.
Prepare materials and experiences before children arrive.	Offer attention and help during children’s experiences, rather than searching for needed items.
Allow flexibility during planned experiences.	A child wanting extra time to finish a painting can listen to story time at the art easel, rather than joining the group on the carpet.
Provide opportunities for children to help by giving them real work to do.	Provide child-sized brooms and dust pans so children can sweep the floor after messy activities.
Use co-operative games to encourage positive interactions rather than competition.	Play musical chairs, with a chair for each child throughout the game.
Review your schedule each year to determine if it fits the group of children currently enrolled.	Place this item on your October staff meeting agenda each year.

What should I consider when preparing the play space and materials?

Strategy	Practice
Provide enough toys and materials for the number of children that may use each area. Don't overwhelm the space with too many items.	Place four sets of dishes in the daily living area with a table and four chairs; three shovels in the sand table.
Have duplicates of popular toys available to reduce waiting time, particularly for infants and toddlers who are not developmentally ready to share.	Provide two or three fire trucks in the block area; three or four riding toys in the active play area.
Display toys and materials so children can see and use them independently.	Place items on open shelves at the children's level.
Offer many open-ended materials that have a variety of uses, to reduce children's frustration.	Provide wood boxes, cardboard boxes, tubes, fabric, clay, etc. so children can play and experiment with them.
Allow children to use toys and materials in more than one area to deepen and sustain their play.	Children making play dough cookies in the art area can be encouraged to bake them in the toy oven in the daily living area.
Create enough space in each area for children to move around easily.	Rearrange shelving to expand the play area if children seem crowded.
Encourage small group interaction by allowing children to form natural groups	A small group size that is flexible and based on children's interests, promotes positive, genuine social relationships.
Place furniture to define short walkways throughout the room.	Avoid large, open spaces or long, straight pathways that encourage running.
Tone down visuals so the surroundings are calm and relaxing.	Turn down the lights; reduce vibrant colours; and clear clutter from floors, shelves and walls.
Adjust noise levels to create a peaceful atmosphere.	Occasionally, have soft music playing during quiet times (ex: lunch or end of the day).

How can I help children develop the skills to solve conflicts?

Children must be involved in resolving their own conflicts, rather than having adults do it for them. Together, children and caring adults are active partners in the learning process. This balanced approach is critical in helping children develop the skills to begin resolving conflicts on their own. When children are aware of how their own actions affect others, they are better able to make appropriate and effective choices to overcome difficulties. Knowing how to react during conflict will help children gain independence, confidence and the inner control to handle their own emotions. Try the following strategy in the steps below.

Approach quickly and calmly to stop hurtful or unsafe behaviour right away.	Stay nearby so children know that you are ready to offer help and support.
Acknowledge each child's feelings with a simple description.	"You seem angry."
Gather information from each child involved.	"Let's talk about what happened. Janelle, you tell me first and then it will be Luke's turn to talk."
Identify and state the problem to the children.	"You both want to sit in the same spot at the table."
Brainstorm solutions with the children.	"What ideas do you have to solve this problem? What else can you do?"
Allow the children to develop a solution and use it.	"What idea do you choose?"
Follow up by checking back and offering assistance if needed.	"How is your idea working?"

Positive, supportive guidance strategies create a sense of belonging and increase children's ability to make friends and resolve conflicts. They contribute to children's development and learning and provide the foundation for success in your program, school and beyond.

If you continue to have difficulty guiding behaviours after using these strategies, contact your child care co-ordinator. Your child care co-ordinator can assist with these situations and, as necessary, identify supports and other professionals that may be available to help.

References

These sources were used for this guide and may be helpful for further reference.

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