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Child
guidance
techniques

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This bulletin was prepared by Roberta Frasier Anderson, Oregon State University Extension specialist, emeritus, and former chairman of the Department of Child Development at Washington State University. Mrs. Anderson, the mother of three, has had extensive teaching experience with three- and four-year-olds and has worked with many groups of parents.

The manuscript was reviewed and approved for regional use by Extension staff at the University of Idaho and Washington State University.



Child guidance techniques

Every parent or person who works with children is faced in any one day with a myriad of situations in which he wants to get cooperation from children and teach them a better way to act. Some people seem to have a special ability which enables them to work with a minimal amount of frustration and few major conflicts. Others seem to be in a constant power struggle. Observations of intuitive parents and professional workers with children reveal some techniques or ways of acting which are effective most of the time.

Persons who use these methods effectively have a philosophy about children and a sense of direction which reflects on the child. However, anyone who is willing to give thought to what he wants to teach a child and who is willing to practice some special techniques can act in such a way that children learn to conform to the expectations of adults and learn a way to meet life situations.

Helpful guidance techniques

Focus on "DOs" instead of "DON'Ts"

If you listen to the ways in which parents guide children, you will find the words "don't," "stop," and "quit" prefacing many commands to children. Telling a child what not to do does not prepare him for what to do, or teach him how to handle a situation in a better way. Translating the "DON'Ts" into "DO's" shows a child a more acceptable way to act.



DON'Ts	Translated into DOs
Don't throw the ball	Roll the ball on the floor
Don't squeeze the kitten	Hold the kitty gently
Quit hitting	Talk to him—tell him what you want
Don't touch	Just look

Build feelings of confidence

It is important for a child to develop a feeling that he is able to do things, that he is a capable and worthwhile person. A "can do" feeling enables a child to try new things and to approach school and other life situations with confidence. Exposure to belittling experiences destroys self-confidence.



Situation	Belittling	Constructive
Peter spills the garbage he's emptying	Can't you ever do anything right?	That's a hard job —n e x t t i m e carry it this way and then it won't spill
Johnny cries in frustration	If you'd just listen to me, that wouldn't happen	You need to do this first and then it will work
Willie cries because he can't get a wagon wheel on his trike	I told you it wouldn't work	Let's see why it didn't work

Change the environment to change behavior

Wise adults look for the cause of misbehavior. Sometimes changing the environment will solve situations which frustrate children and irritate parents. If Sally spills milk at every meal, change the environment by providing a different type of glass. A wide, heavy-bottomed glass will reduce tipping. Or put a small amount of milk in the glass. If this does not work, observe what causes the tipping.

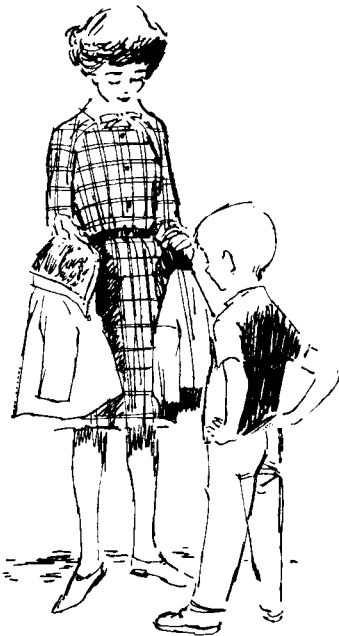
If Betty and Bob kick one another at the table, change the environment by rearranging the seating. Have Betty sit at one end of the table and Bob at the other so their feet cannot *accidentally* hit one another.

When the children start fighting in the back seat of the car, the environment can be changed by having one sit in front and the other in back.

Accept the child's decision if you give a choice

Many conflicts of wills develop between parents and children because a parent thoughtlessly gives a choice when he is only willing to accept one answer. It is important for children to learn to make decisions, but it is poor training when decisions made are not accepted. If you listen to adults, you will discover that they frequently create problems for themselves by giving a child a choice when no choice is available. (Giving another adult a choice when none exists is frustrating, too!)

If you are not going to let Billy outside without his coat, you are asking for trouble when you say, "Do you want to wear your coat?" Chances are Billy will say "no." Eventually you will probably deliver an ultimatum that he cannot go outside without his coat and you are both worn out and unhappy. But if you ask, "Do you want to wear your red jacket or your blue coat?" you give a choice so that either answer is acceptable and you are both happy. If there is no choice involved, a simple "You need to put on your coat before you go outside" gets better results. "It's time to come in for dinner" is a wiser approach than "Do you want to come in for dinner?" "Mary, you need to go to the bathroom," gets better results than "Do you have to go to the bathroom?"



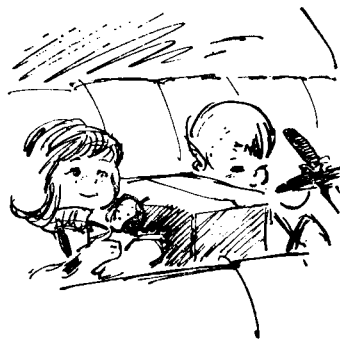
Work with a child instead of against him

The old principle of working with the grain of the wood or the fabric applies to children as well as to inanimate objects. Parents who "work with a child" recognize the child's needs at a particular age. For example, the young child learns through all his five senses. He has to touch, taste, and smell as well as see and hear. If you work with his "grain," you give him an environment in which he is free to use these senses. You know that as he gets older he will know how certain things taste and feel and not have as great a need to mouth or handle objects. You help him toward his growth and work with his natural inclinations. Many adults find this need on the part of the small child to touch, taste, and feel most annoying. One way to make life simpler is to remove as many breakable, nontouchable objects as possible from use, and have available the kinds of things a small child can touch.

If a youngster pours his milk on the table, you work with his need for new experiences and experimentation by providing a small pitcher so he can pour his own milk. Marking the outside of the glass with fingernail polish can give him a guideline so he knows how full to fill the glass.

The parent who forbids, scolds, and punishes a child for taking things apart is working against a child's natural curiosity. He works with a child when he provides some things which can be taken apart and put back together. Care needs to be exercised in providing things that are within the ability of the child to put back together. Pieces of pipe which screw together help satisfy this need to take things apart and are within a child's ability to put back together.

Parents who expect children to ride together for any distance without fighting are not taking into consideration the child's need for activity. Parents who work with the child and his needs, plan for games and distracting activities to keep the children occupied. Parents undertaking a long trip might pile their baggage in the center of the back seat instead of one side and thus provide a barrier between youngsters. Such an arrangement recognizes that children cooped up in a small place for a long period of time are bound to fight with one another.



Give the security of limits

Each individual needs to have his boundaries defined. He needs to know how far he can go. Within the limits, he needs freedom to make the decisions he is capable of making. It is a delicate line between too much freedom for a child and not enough freedom. Research studies show that the same behavior pattern is usually displayed by the child who has either too much or too little freedom.

The freedom and limits needed vary from child to child. Some children appear to need a high fence, others can manage with a low one. Most important, perhaps, is for a child to know that there are outside limits which help him to maintain self-control and that these limits will be enforced.

Deciding upon limits for each child is a difficult task for adults. It is helpful to evaluate limits in terms of these questions:

Is this limit necessary for the child's safety?

Is it necessary for the safety or well-being of others?

Is it necessary for the protection of property?

Is this a limit which is still necessary or has it been outgrown?

Is this limit primarily for the convenience of adults?

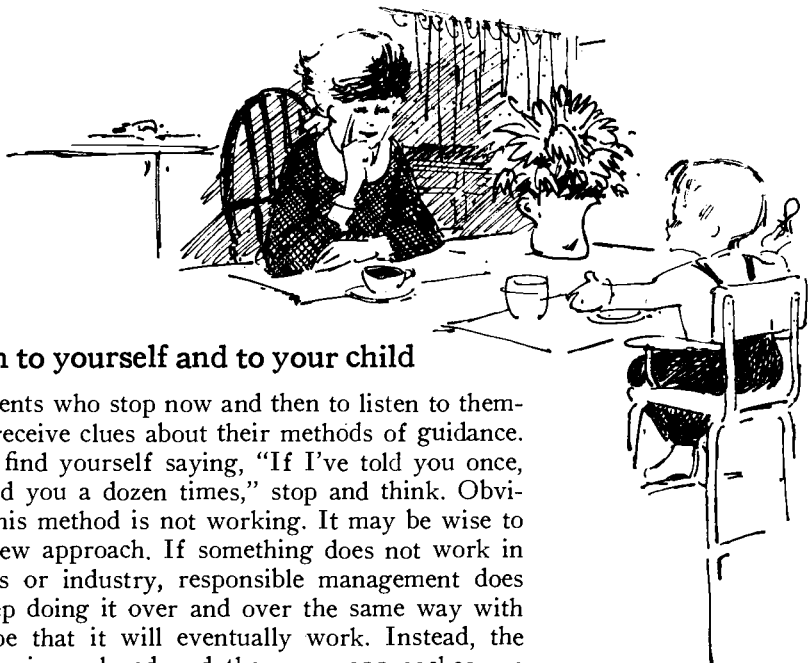
Does this limit keep him from trying things and experimenting?

How can the limit be enforced?

Better cooperation is usually received when limits are few and enforceable and when a child has freedom to make decisions within the boundaries of the limits. Children need increased opportunity to share in setting limits as they grow older.

Sometimes parents define limits "because I say so" without thinking about the reason for the limit. Other parents have slipped into the habit of automatically saying "no." Not all limits need to be explained to a child, but the person setting a limit should understand the reason for it.





Listen to yourself and to your child

Parents who stop now and then to listen to themselves receive clues about their methods of guidance. If you find yourself saying, "If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times," stop and think. Obviously this method is not working. It may be wise to try a new approach. If something does not work in business or industry, responsible management does not keep doing it over and over the same way with the hope that it will eventually work. Instead, the situation is analyzed and then new approaches are tried. The same method is appropriate in the guidance of children. Listening gives you an opportunity to check upon yourself, to evaluate, and to make new approaches.

If you listen to children, you will receive some clues about what they have been learning. Often adults are surprised to discover that children are learning something different than parents thought they were teaching.

Set a good example

It is a truism that children "catch" their education from parents. They learn from day-to-day experiences. The parent who consistently slaps or screams at a child is teaching that this is the way to treat other people. The mother who sends Susie to the door to tell the salesman she is not at home has a difficult time convincing Susie that it is not right to lie. The parent who disobeys speed laws is teaching a lack of respect for the law.

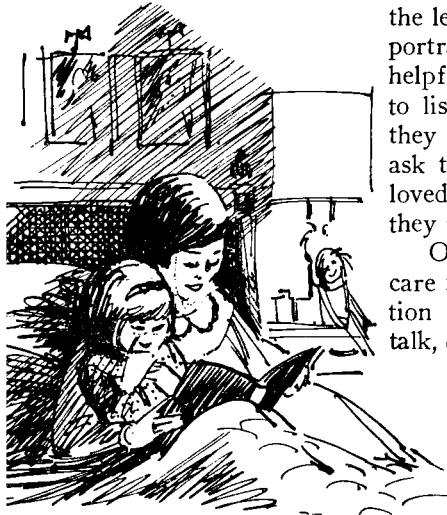
Parents who show concern for others, who talk through differences in opinion, who respect the rights of children as well as adults, are teaching these concepts to their children.

Show your love to a child in ways he can understand

Parents show their love to children by doing for them. They make them eat food which is "good for them," go to bed early, wear a coat, and all the many other things necessary in caring for children. However, the child may not interpret this as love. In fact, he may see it as interference. Mothers and fathers have to do all these things, but they also need to be sure they show love in ways the child can understand.

There are many ways to get across the message of love. Perhaps the easiest way and one that is used the least is the warm, friendly smile. Words can also portray feelings. "You're a fine boy." "That was a helpful thing to do." "I like you." Sometimes it helps to listen to other parents talk to their children. Do they sound as if they love their child? Parents might ask themselves if a stranger would know that they loved their child by the things they say and the words they use.

Other ways you can show a child you love and care for him are by giving him your undivided attention at times, by reading a story, listening to him talk, or playing with him.



Keep your eye on the future

As you make decisions on how to act in any situation, think ahead about how this will contribute to the child's ultimate growth. Are you concentrating on the important things or making mountains out of molehills? Many points that parents choose as issues are not worth the effort. It is wise to make the stand on the really important issues.

Helping a child grow from infancy to adulthood is one of the most fascinating and challenging experiences a person can have. It is fascinating and challenging only if we can keep a perspective. We need to keep our "eyes on the stars as we keep our feet on the ground!"



Dividends to you

As a parent you are probably thinking that this sounds all right, but it will not work with my child. You may feel that this is not a practical approach, that no mother could possibly have time or energy to guide her children this way. The surprising thing is that it saves time and energy in the long run. And although it will not work all of the time, it does enough of the time to make it worthwhile. Guidance of one's own child is always difficult, but you can learn and apply these techniques part of the time to your own and other people's children. If you can incorporate these techniques into your way of thinking, you will find that they pay dividends to you in greater satisfaction as a parent and in having a happier child. Wise parents recognize that because they are human and have many demands made upon them, there will be many times when they will yell at, say don't to, slap, or spank their child. Their patience will be exhausted many times within a day. Even if some mother is so superhuman that she can apply all these techniques all the time, she will find that her Johnny or Susie does not always cooperate. Children are human, too. Some days they are tired and weary. They have "perverse" days just as adults do. But "good management" is just as important for children as it is for stock or plants.

It helps to remember that the years children are pre-schoolers are a short proportion of the total family life cycle. However, the satisfactions and experiences the child receives in these years lay the groundwork for the future. Parenthood is worthy of our best knowledge, insight, and skill as well as our love and devotion.



1. Translate these DON'Ts into DOs (Show a child what he can do).

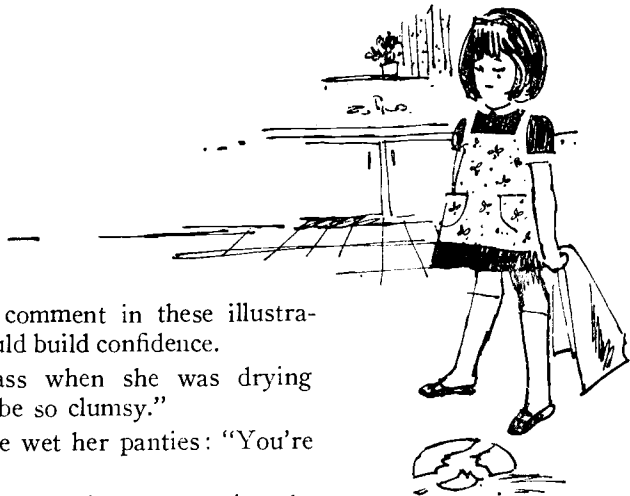
"Don't drag your sweater in the dirt."

"Don't scream at me."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Don't run in the store."

"Don't talk back to me."



2. Change the belittling comment in these illustrations to one which would build confidence.

Mary broke a glass when she was drying dishes: "Don't be so clumsy."

Four-year-old Susie wet her panties: "You're a bad girl."

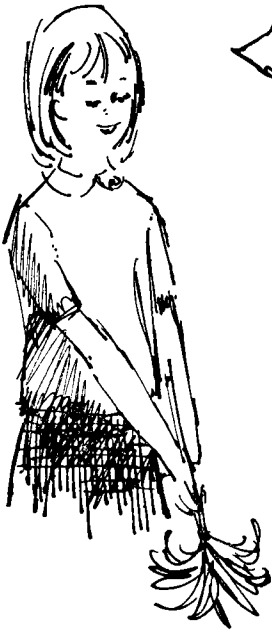
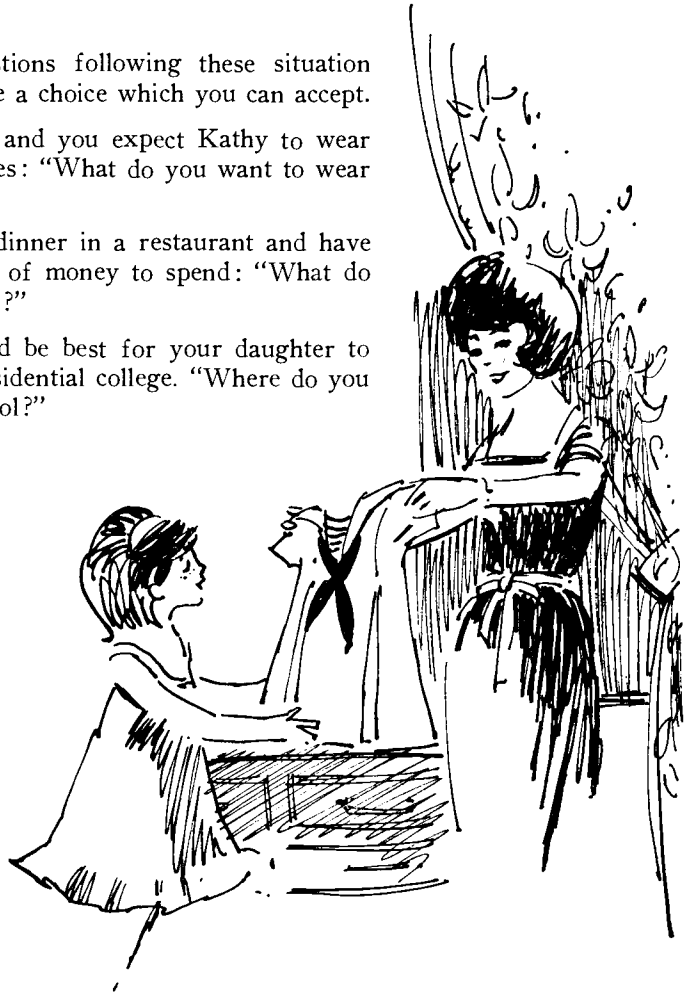
Bill bumped a tree when he was mowing the lawn: "Can't you ever do anything right?"

3. Restate the questions following these situation statements to give a choice which you can accept.

You are visiting and you expect Kathy to wear one of two dresses: "What do you want to wear today?"

You are having dinner in a restaurant and have a limited amount of money to spend: "What do you want to order?"

You feel it would be best for your daughter to go to a public residential college. "Where do you want to go to school?"



4. In the following situations the child is given a choice although he really has none. How could you approach the situation so that you do not put yourself in the position of refusing to accept his choice?

You are visiting with your four-year-old and you have to leave in order to meet an older youngster at school: "Do you want to go now?"

You intend for your daughter to dust the living room before guests arrive: "Do you want to dust the living room for me?"

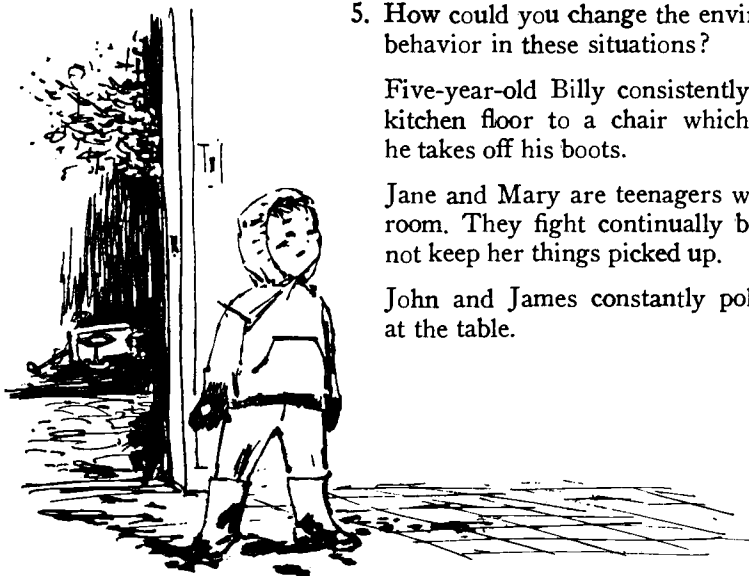
Penny is dancing around and obviously has to go to the toilet: "Do you want to go to the toilet?"

5. How could you change the environment to change behavior in these situations?

Five-year-old Billy consistently tracks across the kitchen floor to a chair which he sits on when he takes off his boots.

Jane and Mary are teenagers who share the same room. They fight continually because Mary does not keep her things picked up.

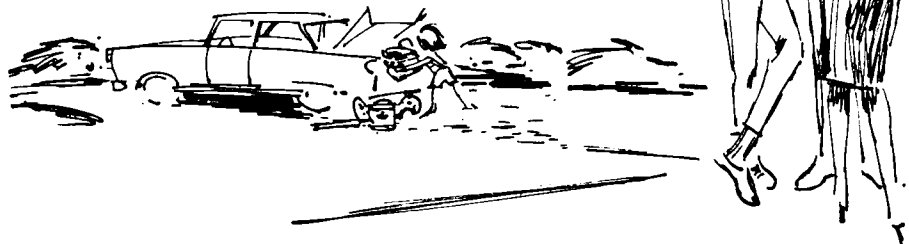
John and James constantly poke at one another at the table.



6. If your goal is to work with a child in terms of his needs at each stage of development, how would you handle these situations?

Alice is two and climbs on all the furniture. You cannot let her do this. What can you do?

Bill is 15 and does not want to go on a day's outing with the family.



7. What would be reasonable limits and how would you go about setting them for (a) TV viewing for all children in the family, (b) use of scissors by a four-year-old, (c) driving of the family car by a 17-year-old?

Do something positive

1. Keep a record for one day of the things you say to a child when (a) it is time for bed, (b) you want him to do a good job, (c) you want him to turn off TV, and (d) you want him to change his behavior.
2. Estimate the number of times you say “no,” “don’t,” “stop,” or “quit” during a day. Keep a record for a day.
3. Think about the things you do in terms of the values you have been trying to teach your children. Do you “practice what you preach”?
4. What evidence do your family members have that you love them? Keep a list for a day. Have the older children keep a list, too.
5. After you have had a struggle with a family member over some issue, evaluate it in terms of the difference this is likely to make five years in the future.

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A Pacific Northwest Cooperative Extension Publication

PNW 64

Reprinted July 1975

Published and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, by the Extension Service, Oregon State University, Joseph R. Cox, director; the Washington State University Extension Service, J. O. Young, director; the University of Idaho Agricultural Extension Service, James L. Graves, director; and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating.