

# Ideas for Preventing Behavior Challenges

Understanding and preventing challenging behaviors starts with identifying their underlying purpose and proactively teaching alternative, more appropriate ways to communicate. Here are some examples of practical strategies to help parents and caregivers support children effectively:

## 1. Understand the Communicative Intent

- All behaviors serve a purpose. Try to understand what your child is attempting to communicate through their behavior.
- Teach your child appropriate ways to express their needs (e.g., using visuals, simple words, or gestures).
- Reinforce and praise any attempts at appropriate communication.

## 2. Reinforce Positive Behaviors

- Give **specific feedback** when your child engages in positive behavior (e.g., "Thank you for waiting quietly!", "Nice using your words," "Thanks for helping").
- Pay attention to spontaneous appropriate behaviors and reinforce them as consistently as possible.
- Use **ample praise and reinforcement** to encourage desired behaviors.

## 3. Plan for Transitions

- Prepare your child for upcoming transitions by giving **warnings about changes in routine** (e.g., "In five minutes, we will clean up.").
- Use **visual timers or countdowns** to help your child understand time expectations.

## 4. Offer Choices

- Provide choices to give your child a sense of control (e.g., "Do you want to read a book or play with blocks first?").
- Keep choices simple and within reason to avoid overwhelming the child.

## 5. Consider Sensory Needs

- Be mindful of your child's sensory preferences and triggers.
- Offer sensory tools like fidget toys or noise-canceling headphones.

- Allow access to a **safe space** where the child can calm down during overwhelming situations.
- Teach your child how to **request a break** when they feel overstimulated using visuals or cue cards.

## 6. Respect Personal Space

- Respect your child's personal space and **teach them to respect the personal space of others**.
- If your child needs space to self-regulate, allow time without excessive verbal prompts or physical closeness. Sometimes children just need space and time.

## 7. Teach Self-Regulation Strategies

Proactively teach your child how to calm down when they feel anxious or upset. Create a **calm-down toolbox** with strategies like:

- Deep breaths
- Counting to 10
- Squeezing a stress ball
- Asking for help
- Requesting a break

Use visuals or social stories to remind the child of these strategies during difficult moments.

## 8. Avoid Reinforcing Inappropriate Behaviors

Be careful not to unintentionally reinforce challenging behaviors. For example:

- If a child screams to avoid washing hands and you let them leave, the behavior is reinforced.
- If your child screams and then you offer preferred items to calm them down, this can unintentionally teach that screaming grants access to those preferred items.

Instead, **wait for calm moments** and reinforce positive behaviors immediately.

- Decreasing the amount of effort or challenge can be helpful. If your child struggles with completing a task, frustration can stem from the level of effort required. Reducing the number of steps, providing prompts, or offering help can alleviate frustration and prevent overwhelming feelings.

## 9. Use Redirection

- When interfering behaviors occur, **redirect the child to an appropriate activity** or provide a simple choice.
- Offer alternative ways to express needs (e.g., tapping your shoulder instead of yelling for attention, saying "no thank you" instead of screaming or pushing things away).

## 10. Identify Triggers and Antecedents

- Make a list of known triggers (e.g., loud noises, crowded spaces, unexpected changes).
- Be prepared and **prepare your child** for possible triggers using preventive strategies when possible (e.g., using headphones, preparing for changes, priming, allowing access to regulation items and techniques).

## 11. Adjust Strategies to Meet Individual Needs

- Every child is unique—modify strategies based on what works best for your child.
- Be flexible with reinforcement, visuals, and communication tools.

## 12. Understand the Function of Behavior

- Take time to observe and **identify the purpose** behind challenging behaviors.
- Once the function is understood, teach **replacement behaviors** that fulfill the same need in a more appropriate way.