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Parenting & Structure

Most children benefit from routines that are maintained as much as reasonable, seven days per week. Children's activities, including homework, computer/T.V. use, meals, and bed times need to be structured and made routine, allowing for some changes, but infrequently.

The following is a four-step program that emphasizes obtaining the child's attention and then provides immediate and frequent consequences. The steps involved are the "Four Cs" of Clarity, Conciseness, Consequences, and Consistency.

Step One:

Ensure that the child's attention is adequately obtained visually, auditorially, and with touch. Do not give directions "long distance", from across the room or from another room. Give instructions, directions, and all information while standing next to the child.

To further obtain the child's attention, touch the child such as on the arm, shoulder or hold their cheeks with your hands. Face-to-face contact is best. Touching will break the connection the child has with fantasy, with the T.V. or even with a spot on the wall and will increase the connection with you.

Step Two:

Do not over-stimulate or overwhelm the child with too much information presented all at once. Give them instructions or directions one at a time or break them down into stages or segments. As the child learns the process and is paying increased attention, then the number of requests given to the child can be increased.

Work to clearly define a task and to break complex requests into their components or sub-tasks. Telling your child to "clean up your room" is too indirect for the child and also difficult for the parent to easily evaluate. Instead, tell the child to "put your clothes in the drawers and your shoes in the closet." These tasks the child and the parent can measure when they are completed. As appropriate, the parent can then introduce other components of the bigger task of "clean up your room", such as "now, put all your toys in your toy box, hang these shirts in your closet, and smooth your bed covers". Breaking tasks into their components allow you also to give more consequences, whether negative or positive.

Step Three:

This step involves providing feedback and consequences to the child. Consequences can be either negative (punishment) or positive (rewards). It is best to provide the

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consequences very close in time to the behavior of the child. If the child whines or argues, work to ignore them by turning your back, walking away, or by becoming involved in some other activity. Arguing back with the child is providing them a positive consequence: attention. In general, the value of the punishment or reward for behavioral change is not related to the intensity (or severity) of the consequences but to its immediacy and frequency. Rewards for children include the categories of praise, food, money, free time, and toys. The number one reward, the one most children want most often, is praise. Use it appropriately and use it often, much more often than the others.

Punishment is usually specific to a behavior that has occurred. Rewards and particularly praise, can be for specific behaviors but they also can be given at random times. "You really are a cute girl" and "I'm glad you're my son" are more connected with Being rather than with Doing. Learn to reward children for their attempts at compliance and for approximations to the desired behavior. Reward them with praise or concrete rewards by saying, "You're making progress", "You're learning how to do it", "You have 3 out of 4 right, congratulations!"

Be certain to give the child a positive image of the behavior you want. Don't say "Stop bouncing around on the sofa". Instead, say "Sit on the sofa with your hands down and your feet over the edge here."

Step Four:

Some activities are more important than others so this step involves prioritization. Children have more energy than parents so learn to use yours wisely. Children learn at their own pace, you have time (years) to work with them, so do not attempt to do too much simultaneously or you will exhaust yourself and overwhelm your child. We retain more information if we not only talk about it but if we write it down. Make a chart or a list of the most important behaviors to work on for a month. The charts are just as important for the parents as for the child because they help the parents focus and prioritize in their busy lives. The charts can have spaces for each behavior each day. The parents can use a check mark, initials, or colored markers to indicate compliance or non-compliance. Parents can have different levels of rewards, or punishment, for the children based on the number of checks they earn. Small rewards ought to be relatively easy to earn while large rewards would require repeated effort.