

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors by Acknowledging Positive Behaviors

What does it mean to acknowledge positive behaviors?

Acknowledging positive behaviors is a strategy that teachers can use to increase positive behaviors in the classroom and decrease negative behaviors. Wow...who doesn't want that? Using this simple strategy, teachers devote more time and attention to desirable behaviors than they do to misbehaviors. This strategy helps adults focus on good behavior and will lead children to repeat those behaviors. 'You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar' is certainly true when guiding young children.

Why is it important to acknowledge positive behaviors?

Children constantly seek attention from the adults who care for them. Your reactions to a child's behavior will determine future behavior. For example, if you snicker when a toddler says a 'bad word' he/she is likely to keep saying that word...whether you want him to or not. The need for adult attention is so important to young children that they will settle for negative responses just to connect with you. Paying attention to misbehaviors can actually result in an increase in the behavior that you wish to discourage. On the other hand, acknowledging children's positive behaviors can lead to increases in playing well with other children, in following adult directions and in self-help skills.

What can you do in your classroom?

The children in your class will develop best when you build nurturing and responsive relationships with them. Acknowledging positive behavior is an easy way to bolster those relationships. Children's behaviors and the feel of your classroom environment will change when you give positive responses to behaviors you like and you ignore the behaviors you don't like (unless safety issues arise). There are many ways to give positive responses and express your approval: tell your children you're proud of them; give them a high-five, thumbs up, a hug or a smile. Your children want your attention and approval; give it to them when they exhibit positive behaviors and those behaviors will continue. Some teachers worry that their class may end up completely out of control if they do not respond to children's misbehaviors. Be warned: when you first stop reinforcing bad behaviors by ignoring them, children may still try to get your attention through those behaviors. However, if you are responding to positive behaviors, you will see an initial improvement, followed by some good days and bad days, followed by more consistently good days...and that's the goal!

This approach works best if you make a plan and keep track of the changes in your classroom. Select one positive behavior you would like to encourage and develop a plan for responding when it happens. For example, you might focus on clean-up time. Write a list of behaviors you would like to see at clean-up time and a list of positive responses to use when you see those behaviors. Keep your responses simple and descriptive ('Thank you for putting the truck on the shelf.') and make sure you include nonverbal responses like smiles, winks or a thumbs-up. Then keep track of the 'before, during and after' behavior of just a few children during clean-up. What did they do? How did you respond? Very quickly, you will see the pattern between children's behaviors and your responses. Comment on a child who is doing a good job cleaning up and watch other children imitate that behavior to gain your approval.

Research on this topic:

When teachers use this strategy they see less aggressive and destructive behaviors and children follow instructions better. Additionally, teachers are less likely to spend time responding to misbehavior and don't use punishment as often to control behaviors. The stress levels in the classroom are also decreased!

Food for thought:

Put yourself in the children's shoes: What if your director made periodic public announcements over the intercom each day of all the things you did incorrectly? 'Miss Pam had two cots that were too close together and her circle time was too long for 2-year olds.' She never mentioned the wonderful, engaging activities that were happening in your classroom. How would you feel when you left in the afternoon? Would you be eager to return the next day? How many days of that negative acknowledgement would it take to really affect your self-worth? Both adults and children need to understand what behaviors are appropriate and acknowledgment of positive behavior is one of the best ways to assure appropriate behavior is repeated.

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