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## FEATURE

# Questions all teachers—and parents—ask about guiding young children

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Whenever teachers, directors, trainers, and parents get together, the conversation inevitably turns to the best ways to guide—and manage—children’s behaviors. Mastering preschool guidance techniques requires attention, practice, patience, and a deep understanding of children’s developmental levels, temperaments, and problem-solving skills.

Positive guidance techniques are democratic and respectful to both children and adults. It relies on an adult’s willingness to attend to children’s behaviors in a way that fosters the ability to take responsibility for actions and increase self-regulation—what we call *self-discipline*.

Guidance takes many forms—

- An affirming smile and nod to Julie when she invites Carlos to build a castle with her,
- An immediate redirecting response to Kiko when he grabs the shovel Uri is using,
- A deliberately and purposefully arranged and

equipped classroom that fosters independence and creativity,

- A clearly and consistently applied consequence for dangerous or aggressive lapses in self-control as when Maggie kicks and wails, “I hate you” at nap-time.
- A practiced problem-solving session when children’s interests diverge and threaten as when three children want to use the same wagon.

And guidance has two goals: Short term it can stop dangerous or inappropriate behavior, and long term gives children a behavioral framework that supports independence, builds confidence, and promotes self-regulating, pro-social interactions with people and things.

## What is the difference between guidance and discipline?

Both discipline and guidance have to do with changing children’s behaviors. Typically, however, discipline is imposed by an adult in a way that asserts that adult’s power (through spanking, punishing, labeling, shaming, and depriving) and leaves the child feeling confused because the focus is only what the child has done wrong.

Guidance, on the other hand, reinforces a child’s increasing ability to choose to do the right thing—promoting greater responsibility and self-control—because the adult recognizes the inappropriate action but focuses on alternative actions—choices a child can make—to quiet conflict and ill-will. Positive guidance techniques—including offering choices, pointing out consequences, and modeling pro-social behavior—invite and allow children to be responsible and in control of their own actions. They focus on what is right rather than on what is wrong and help children incorporate the distinctions.

Take for example, a typical preschool classroom.

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Developmentally, the children

- Assert their independence,
- Test limits,
- Take more responsibility for their own actions, and
- Gain greater self-control over their behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors.

In the children's rush toward independence, however, they need the security of limits. Like adults, they need to know how far they can go while having the freedom to make decisions within those limits. Because it's a new skill, preschoolers need lots of practice balancing independence and self-control with limits and the consequences of their actions.

## How do we teach the behaviors we expect?

Modeling, coaching, and cueing are effective teaching tools in any situation and are especially useful when we're dealing with children's social behaviors. For example, Mr. Franklin is sitting with children at snack time on the first day of school. He notices that all hands grab for the plate of cheese and crackers at the same time and knows that squabbles and spills will result. He picks up the plate and says, "Watch me." Mr. Franklin then takes a cracker and a slice of cheese and puts it on his plate. He then hands the plate to Fritz and nods his expectation that Fritz will follow his example. Mr. Franklin has used *modeling* to teach the group the expected behavior for sharing snacks.

Mr. Franklin continues to teach by chanting, "Fritz has taken his cracker and cheese and passes the tray to Becca. Becca takes her cracker and cheese and passes the tray to Harvey. Harvey takes his cracker and cheese and passes the tray to Melissa. Say it with me." In continuing the teaching, Mr. Franklin has used *coaching* to support children in learning and reinforcing a new behavior.

Further, adults can give *cues* for expected behaviors. Children often revert to impulsive or unhelpful ways of behaving because they remember—and act on—an old behavior like grabbing for snack rather than passing a platter. Without shaming or punishing, adults can jog children's memories with matter-of-fact behavioral cues or reminders. Mr. Franklin might reinforce the platter-passing expectation by taking a photo of children passing the platter and taping it to the table, or singing the platter-passing chant before children go to the snack table. The picture and the chant offer cues about expected behaviors.

## How do we set limits—make rules—that work?

Children younger than 3 years need constant attention and guidance from competent and trusted adults who can anticipate needs, interests, dispositions, and developmental skills across all domains. Adults, both teachers and parents, can redirect these youngest children to appropriate activities (from crayons on the wall to crayons on paper, for example), arrange furnishings and materials for safe and creative exploration, and build a daily routine that is respectful of the child's natural rhythms and needs for sleep, stimulation, food, and quiet time.

Older children need the same things but are ready to take some responsibility for their own behaviors and the choices they make. For children skilled enough to understand the concept of rule, there are a few basics. Most early care and education professionals agree that the only necessary rules involve the health and safety of children and the environment. For example, Ms. Matthews' classroom has these rules posted on the wall:

We will take care of the things in the classroom.  
We will take care of each other.

All classroom issues can be handled under these two rules; too many rules are not only hard to remember, they can also become hard to enforce. These two rules are the baseline for Ms. Matthews to address hitting others, wasting paint, and even tattling.

An effective limit never degrades a child through the use of threats and ridicule, but rather focuses on clear and consistent direction and positive reinforcement. Effective, appropriate limits include the following:

**Justification.** In addition to establishing clear expectations of children's behavior, an effective limit has true justifications rather than being an arbitrary statement like "Because I said so." If you cannot justify a limit, perhaps it shouldn't be made. Say: "Hitting is not OK because it hurts someone."

**Clarity.** An effective limit is simple and direct. Say: "Snack wastes go in the trash can."

**Consistency.** Effective limits are consistent—they are established for all of the children and remain the same across time. They don't discriminate and aren't products of an adult's mood on a given day. Say: "At clean-up time, everyone helps."

**Consequences.** It makes no sense to set a limit unless children know the consequences of breaking it. To be effective a consequence must be realistic and related to the original behavior. Say: “Angela, you’ve dribbled paint on the floor. Paint on the floor needs cleaning right away.”

Experienced teachers tend to maintain a tighter structure early in the year or when coalescing a new group of children into a cooperative learning community. Start by helping children learn classroom routines and each other. Keep to the schedule, maintain the space arrangement, label storage areas for toys and materials, and respond quickly and consistently to problems. This helps children know that you are in control of the classroom and are an adult who is fair, caring, and worthy of trust.

## How do I get children to listen to me?

What are you trying to say, and how are you saying it? Different situations require unique styles of communication and even the youngest children can discern differences in your body language—facial expression and tension—and tone of voice.

We listen differently to what is new or unfamiliar and tend to ignore what is routine and expected. Think about how quickly you turn off the frequent reminders to wash your hands and keep your hands away from your face or how attuned we are to the weather forecast following storms and tornadoes.

Similarly, if children constantly hear the loud com-

mands “NO!,” “Stop,” and “Quit,” they will likely tune you out. It’s not that the children aren’t listening, it’s just that they’ve heard it all before. You aren’t offering any new information. Instead of “Stop that,” be specific about what the child is doing or not doing—“Kicking hurts; it’s not OK to kick Jamie.” When children can learn that you respond to their interests and needs, they are eager for the new information you’ll share.

When you give information about a new learning material, show it, talk about how it’s used, and give children an opportunity to touch and investigate. When you share information about a behavioral issue, be clear in your expectation, give the direction once, and follow through. For example, when you tell children it’s time to wash hands before lunch and Lizzie continues to play, avoid saying things like “Lizzie, how many times do I have to tell you....” Instead, go to Lizzy and guide her by the shoulders to the sink. Avoid repeating yourself. If you say, “Brandon, pegs stay on the table; they don’t go in your mouth,” and Brandon puts the peg in his mouth again, take the peg game away and guide Brandon to another activity. Children rely on you to follow through, enforcing rules consistently and fairly.

Try to vary your expression, hand gestures, tone of voice, and conversational style according to the activity at hand. Greet children enthusiastically but don’t overwhelm. Calm a loud group by speaking softly. Kneel or squat to children’s eye level and use a normal, conversational tone of voice when you’re sharing information about an activity. Avoid barking commands and shouting across distances unless there is an immediate and genuine emergency (like a child running into the path of a traveling tricycle). Learn problem-solving techniques and use them routinely so that soon the children won’t need your intervention in every squabble.

Children want and need meaningful contact with adults. Once you establish trust, they will be eager to listen.

## How do I get children to share?

Your expectations must match the ages and developmental stages of the children you’re working with. Recognizing what children need and what they are able to do will help you anticipate problems and work with children to resolve them.

Before learning to share, children must master

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some major developmental milestones. Infants and toddlers have to learn that objects they see and touch are not simple extensions of themselves. Developmentally, they cannot understand that the ball they are holding could be attractive and desirable to anyone else. The concept of sharing a ball is just as foreign as sharing an arm or foot. Gradually, as children learn to see themselves as unique individuals—generally between 28 and 36 months—they can gradually accept that others have interests and needs similar to their own.

As children develop social skills, they gradually become able to put off satisfying their own needs—delaying gratification—for increasing lengths of time. The trick for teachers and parents is being able to recognize the level of development in every child and to know how long that child can wait for a turn before striking out or biting to express an urgent need. That's why experts recommend having duplicates of toys and materials. Multiples say you respect children's varying needs and interests and that you're able to control the number of altercations over the same desirable object.

There are, however, certain objects that a child should never be expected to share—a lovey or pacifier for example. Part of learning social skills involves respecting another's property. We learn that sharing is a freely offered invitation to participate in an activity—"Would you like to share my playdough?" for example. Sharing does not give others free access to personal property; adults might call this stealing.

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Both are concepts children need to learn from the words and examples of adults.

Older preschoolers and school-age children can learn to share if you provide appropriate opportunities. Taking turns, rotating who gets first choice, instilling problem-solving activities, and cooperating in group projects teach sharing skills that children will need in future education and employment.

## How do teachers and families come to common ground regarding guidance techniques?

Early care and education teachers are in a delicate partnership with the families of the children in their care. Sometimes classroom positive guidance techniques are unfamiliar to parents, and occasionally conflict with the parents' style and practice.

Positive guidance methods work equally well at home and in the classroom. Using words rather than fists, for example, helps children express themselves without aggression or threat in any situation. Difficulty does arise, however, when a parent is a strong advocate of physical punishment and encourages you to "Forget the talk, just swat him."

While maintaining respect for the parent, be clear that you will not violate state licensing laws. In Texas, Standard 746.2805 forbids harsh, cruel, or unusual treatment of a child including

- use of or threat of corporal punishment—including rapping, thumping, yanking, popping, flicking, and swatting;
- pinching, shaking, or biting a child;
- hitting a child with a hand or instrument;
- putting anything in or on a child's mouth;
- humiliating, ridiculing, rejecting, or yelling at a child;
- subjecting a child to harsh, abusive, or profane language,
- placing a child in a locked or dark area, and
- requiring a child to remain silent or inactive for extended periods of time.

As your relationship with parents develops, share some of the techniques that you use in the classroom. Invite parents to observe your class in action and model positive guidance techniques. Plan a parent meeting that explores guidance frustrations and scenarios that can help families employ effective guidance measures.

Share and model these positive guidance strategies:

- Build a supportive environment that mirrors children’s developmental interests and skills
- Offer choices
- Anticipate behavior
- Point out consequences
- Redirect children to alternative activities
- Teach active problem solving
- Model respectful interactions
- Use positive statements
- Inject humor
- Clarify messages
- Use body language and facial expressions like smiles and winks
- Set and maintain limits consistently and fairly
- Offer encouragement

Remember that we frequently rely on old habits and familiar routines rather than look for new techniques that are easier to implement, are more effective, and have long-term social benefits.

## How do I help an out-of-control child?

Children who are out of control—having a temper tantrum, for example—need two things: Their own physical safety and the knowledge that an adult is in control. Tantrums are frequently an extreme cry for help from children who know they don’t have the skills to deal with a particular situation. Fatigue, frustration, or a child’s inability to accept direction can provoke tantrums. A tantrum is one of a child’s most effective and powerful tools for eliciting an adult’s help and attention.

Anticipating a child’s need can help prevent tantrums. Be attentive to situations in which children become overstimulated and unable to employ self-regulation. Check too whether you’ve set the stage for tantrums through inappropriate expectations, extended wait times, restricted equipment and materials, space that is too small for the children to move freely, capricious and ill-timed transitions, or inconsistent rule enforcement.

If a tantrum does occur, however, protect the child from physical harm. You may need to use gentle but firm restraint to keep the child from head banging, biting, or throwing materials. Most children will respond to your hands on their shoulders or arms and your face at their eye level. More violent tantrums may require you to hold the child gently but firmly. While holding the child, quietly repeat, “I’ll

hold you until you are calm.” When the child has stopped thrashing, loosen your hold gradually. Expect the child to continue crying to release tension; use words to help the child calm, relax, and regain control. While giving the child ample time to cool off, stay near, and follow up with a conversation about alternative behaviors.

Beware of habitual tantrums. Unfortunately, some children learn that even threatening a tantrum embarrasses and panics adults. Rather than risk the tantrum, the adult gives in to the child’s demands. As a result, the adult reinforces the child’s negative behavior and loses an opportunity to teach more appropriate social skills.

Breaking a tantrum habit requires an action plan that you and the child’s parents agree to implement consistently. Carefully review the needs and developmental level of the child. All children need to learn that they get more and better attention for positive behaviors. Many children will modify their anti-social behaviors when that behavior is ignored. Assuming there is no danger of physical injury, say clearly and deliberately, “I see you are having a tantrum.” Then turn from the child and toward some exciting classroom discovery. Often when children learn that tantrums don’t get the desired reward—your attention—they usually choose to participate in more productive classroom activities.

## How do I control play that threatens violence?

Media sources never let us forget that the potential for aggression and violence exists—even within the realm of the care and education of young children. Assigning blame to parents, TV, video games, gun laws, or moral apathy may be an interesting intellectual debate for adults but exploring causes of violence does not address the needs of children today. All children need attention, direction, and guidance from the adults who know them best. Children need to feel protected from the world’s dangers—even those adults can’t tame—and to trust they will be able to grow up to be fair, competent, and compassionate adults.

Children who are younger than 4 years often have trouble distinguishing between real and imagined events. When they see images of violence—in cartoons, for example—they don’t usually evaluate whether the characters are really hurt, whether they

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are people or sponges, or whether they will die or recover. They do remember, however, that the scene was exciting and demanded attention. Because children learn by imitating and experimenting, they frequently try to mimic screen action, sometimes with painful results.

Never pass up an opportunity to talk with children about the differences between fantasy and reality—hitting real people hurts. Model, coach, and cue to reinforce behavioral expectation—it's not OK to hurt people or property. Always be consistent and immediate in your response to real or threatened aggression or violence. Practice problem-solving techniques that help children learn the benefits of peaceful conflict resolution.

## **How can I help children develop respect for adults, each other, and themselves?**

Respect is sometimes earned and sometimes offered. People you admire and appreciate for their behavior earn your respect. But sometimes you award respect to people because of their membership in certain groups—religious ministers, elders, employers, or doctors, for example. Our society no longer agrees about which groups deserve respect. Instead we tend to look at individuals within groups. At the neighborhood health clinic, for example, we give respect to Sally the registered nurse, but not to the receptionist who asks intrusive questions and makes us wait.

Over the last 40 years, teachers have experienced a

major shift in the respect offered to members of their profession. Teachers have sometimes responded by giving up hope that they will ever gain respect from children, families, or the community at large. Others feel that respect can still be earned by consistently behaving in ways that demonstrate compassion, trust, honesty, patience, wisdom, and fairness.

In classrooms as in homes, respect is usually two-way: It moves from you to the children and children back to you. Children perceive respect when you listen to their ideas and concerns. They watch and feel your responses—and whether you are sincere and authentic or just counting the minutes until the end of the day. Work to routinely communicate your respect for children as human beings who can learn to share important values like responsibility, pride, and usefulness. When values like respect are important to you, you teach through your behavior and your words how others like to be treated. ■

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