

## POWER OF PREVENTION: HEADING OFF DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR

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In the past, children's challenging behavior was typically addressed with consequences (usually punishment) imposed after the problem behavior occurred. Parents, teachers, and other people supporting children with special needs are now starting to recognize the *power of prevention*. Preventive strategies make problem behavior unnecessary because the situations that set the stage for the problems (e.g., boredom, difficult tasks) have been anticipated and changed. By getting 'out in front of the behavior,' parents can help children deal with daily challenges without resistance or aggression and build the skills children need to be successful. If behavior problems can be stopped before they even have a chance to occur, children may become more receptive to instruction and enthusiastic about learning in general. The changes also may lead to improvements in the child's and family's quality of life.



Preventive strategies involve changing circumstances known to trigger problem behavior before things begin to escalate. This is done by adding cues or reminders for positive behavior and making unpleasant activities more enjoyable or comfortable by adding features the children like. When deciding which prevention strategies make

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sense, the first step is to consider the purpose the behaviors of concern serve for a child. For example, whining may occur for a wide variety of reasons. First, a child may whine to get attention. In that case, prevention strategies should focus on praising or interacting with the child when he or she is behaving well. Second, whining might be directed at getting something the child wants, like toys or snacks. If that is the case, problems can be headed off by communicating to the child more clearly what he

or she may have and when these things will be available. Finally, whining might occur when a child is doing something he or she does not enjoy – with the goal being to avoid that activity. In that case, prevention would involve making those activities more tolerable.

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*In addition to determining the purposes of the child’s behavior, it is also important that parents determine the specific triggers for the problem behavior.*

For example, parents might ask, “What situations would predict that my child would have a problem (or – in essence, what would set my child off)?” Confident answers to this question that lead to conclusions related to possible triggers for behavior will lead directly to effective strategies. These strategies might include avoiding difficult situations, prompting positive behavior or coping strategies, and somehow changing circumstances to make it easier for children to behave.

For example, the table below provides some common challenges and potential solutions

<i>If problems occur when...</i>	<i>Sensible solutions might include:</i>
A child is asked to do a difficult or lengthy household chore or homework	Simplify tasks by breaking them down into smaller steps, providing examples, or offering the child clearer explanations or assistance
A child is unoccupied (e.g., playing by himself) for an extended period of time	Organize toys and materials that the child can get herself or suggest activities and provide special toys when independent play is expected
A child’s surroundings are too stimulating or chaotic	Plan ahead and avoid situations that are just too hard (e.g., holiday shopping at the mall), keep the child on the edge of large groups, or remind the child to let you know when he needs a break
A child has to change from one activity to another (possibly unexpectedly)	Provide warnings when the child’s time is almost up, show or tell the child what is coming next, or use a visual (e.g., written or with pictures) schedule

Prevention strategies must be tailored to a child’s and family’s needs and circumstances to be effective. When parents and other caretakers allow themselves to get creative, however, the options for prevention seem endless. Exactly what is changed and how it is changed depends on many things, such as the predicted effectiveness of the strategy, the fit for the child and those around him or her – as well as the environment, the resources needed, and the ease with which the strategy can be put in place and used on an ongoing basis. The ability to anticipate problems and make reasonable changes before problems occur is the true power of prevention.



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