

## PARENTING WITH POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

### Resolving Children's Behavior Problems More Effectively and Efficiently

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*Jamie hits his older brother Evan – a lot. As a parent, what should I do to address his behavior? Explain that his behavior is unacceptable? Send him to his bedroom? Take away privileges? Just let the boys work it out? The answer is...that it depends.*

Traditionally, behavior management has consisted of a list of potential strategies tied to particular behavior problems: If your child does \_\_\_\_, try \_\_\_\_. More recently, we have come to recognize that this 'hit and miss' approach to resolving behavior problems is not optimally effective. Our reactions (e.g., using time-out, scolding) may stop the child's behavior – at least for the time being, however, we might find those same approaches to be ineffective or counterproductive in other circumstances.

*Why aren't these methods equally effective in all situations with all kids?* It is because children are individuals who respond in unique ways to their environment and motivated by different goals. In order to address children's behavior effectively, we have to first engage in a little detective work in order to determine what triggers the behavior and what does the child get or avoid as a result of the behavior. This individualized problem-solving approach to resolving children's behavior problems is called Positive Behavior Support (PBS). It is based on the principles of behavior (i.e., applied behavior analysis) and has been demonstrated repeatedly to be effective for children and their families in homes, schools, and in the community.

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*How do we use PBS to address children's behavior problems?*

PBS is basically a process of answering questions and then developing solutions based on their answers.

*We want to know:*

- Under what circumstances (when, where, with whom, and during what situations) is the child's problem behavior most and least likely?
- What does the child get or avoid through their problem behavior (as well as for positive behavior)?

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We get the answers to these questions by watching our children interact with other people and their surroundings, talking to other people (e.g., friends, teachers) who know them well, and sometimes recording what we learn. Our goal is to gather information as objectively as possible and continue searching for answers until patterns are clear.

For example, in the situation with Jamie and Evan, we might observe Jamie when he is spending time with Evan in a variety of different situations (e.g., playing alone together or with friends, doing chores or homework, during family activities) and talk with both of the children, family members, and friends to get their ideas about why



problems emerge and continue. After looking objectively at the situation, we might determine that Jamie only hits Evan when Evan is teasing or deliberately ignoring him. We might learn that Jamie rarely hits Evan when they are playing alone together, but rather it happens most when Evan's friends are over. The teasing/ignoring/hitting pattern is also very likely when the children are required to do chores, homework, or family activities they do not like (e.g., visiting elderly relatives). When we look at what tends to occur after Jamie's behavior, we see that hitting ap-

pears to be the only consistently effective strategy Jamie has for getting Evan to stop teasing or pay attention. If we pan out a little and look at Evan's goals, we realize that, if Jamie hits, he is sent in the house or to his room so that Evan can be alone with his friends. During chores and other less desirable activities, the chaos the teasing and hitting produces draws attention away from what the children are supposed to be doing and therefore delays their involvement in those activities.

*“Taking time to determine patterns leads us to more sensible solutions”*

Taking time to determine these patterns leads us to more sensible solutions. We realize that sending Jamie to his room or stopping demands to scold the boys for their behavior is actually feeding in to the problem. We recognize we need to address Evan's teasing and ignoring as well if we are going to change the pattern. With this understanding, we might try some of the following strategies:

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- ⇒ Allow Evan to have time alone with his friends, uninterrupted by Jamie or teaching Jamie how to interact in a more positive manner with the older boys.
- ⇒ Simplify tasks or give the children periodic breaks during homework and chores when they are cooperative and kind to one another.
- ⇒ Teach the children to communicate their needs: for Evan to ask Jamie to let him be alone with his friends, for Jamie to tell Evan to stop teasing or attend to him or get help from his parents, and for Jamie and Evan to ask for reductions in demands or pleasant activities following their completion.
- ⇒ Reward the children for “getting along” with praise, special activities, or passes from unpleasant activities.
- ⇒ Provide consequences (e.g., send friends home) for teasing, as well as hitting.



A common – and maybe logical – reaction to PBS is to say that it sounds too “clinical” or like too much work. It is easier and more natural to simply think on our parental feet. In most cases, our instincts lead us in the right direction; however, when we are faced with long-standing patterns of problem behavior, a more systematic approach may be the most efficient option. In addition, PBS is respectful and productive. Basing our disciplinary methods on children’s needs and motivations acknowledges their individuality and helps them develop the skills they need to function more effectively in their daily lives.

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