## Encouraging Cooperative Behavior

# For Parents and Staff who work with Young Children Sheila Koren, MFT Child and Family Therapist

The Best Behavioral Interventions happen before and prevent incidents. Clear and age appropriate expectations, consistency, patience, and alliances between parents and among caretakers help children develop positive qualities and minimize the confusion that often leads to misbehavior.

Understanding children's individual temperaments and sensitivities help you adapt scheduling and expectations top their abilities. Some children have a more difficult time being rushed than others do. Some need more quiet environments to feel calm and focused. Some need to learn through their own hands-on mistakes.

#### Children Behave Most Cooperatively When:

- Adult Authority is Firm, Consistent and Kind
- Life is well structured with Clear Boundaries
- They have choices within limits
- There is safety and reciprocal respect
- There is opportunity for individual expression

### Children Behave Most Destructively When

- They are hurting and/or needy
- They can't communicate otherwise
- They get more attention for bad than for good behavior
- The environment is inappropriate to their temperaments and sensitivities
- Adults model poor interpersonal skills

#### Discipline Dictionary

The following is an alphabetical list of useful strategies for dealing with children's behavior:

Assess Importance: Is this issue worth your intervention? Some sibling issues, for example, are resolved without adult input. Children get dirty in play.

Be Consistent: If there's no TV until homework is finished, keep it that way every day or as much as possible. Children may beg for exceptions to rules, but learn to abide by them better if rules rarely change. (They often even enjoy the security of rules they claim not to like).

Call a Friend, Relative or the TALKLINE (441-KIDS): Time spent alone with children can be frustrating for any adult. We can easily feel overwhelmed and misunderstood. We are sometimes prone to take actions we may later regret and/or which won't be helpful to the child(ren). Making contact with another adult for comfort and/or help can be reassuring and can help keep us on the right track.

Catch Being Good: Notice and acknowledge when children display wanted behavior. Give more positive than negative attention.

Chart Patterns: Keep records of children's behavior. Watch trends together. Notice what's going on before behavior changes. Look for patterns i.e. a behavior that gets worse right before bedtime may be related to nighttime fears that need to be addressseed.

Don't Talk Too Much: We have two ears and one mouth and all should listen more than we speak. Besides Children turn off and away from what adults have to say when they are bored or overwhelmed with our words.

Firm Limits and Structures: Children need to know what is expected of them, sometimes repeatedly, until they internalize the routines and regulations. If they are getting different messages and different expectations from different caretakers, it will take even longer to absorb and remember with whom they can do what, etc.

Listen/Get More Information: It often takes time to get the whole story from a child. Ask open-ended questions.

What happened before you hit back? Why are you so angry? Are you worried about anything? The behavior may still be inappropriate, but understanding a child's reasoning can help calm him or her down and prevent future episodes.

Logical Consequences: Creating outcomes that might reasonably follow unwanted behavior i.e. if a child refused to share, others need not be encouraged to share with her. If a child cannot get up in time for school, s/he may have to go to bed earlier.

Mediate: Get in the middle of a conflict and help children communicate more constructively with one another. ("It looks to me like Susie didn't mean to step on Juan's toe; Juan, is there anything Susie can do to make things better.")