**Punishment – Lessons Learned?**

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Many times traditional responses to challenging behavior from children are punitive in nature, meaning they are a punishment. Although yelling, threatening, or loss of privileges can get a child’s attention, long-term or consistent changes in behavior may not occur because the child isn’t taking anything useful away from the exchange. Threatening with loss of recess every time a child talks out in class may initially stop the talking out, but then what? Recess may eventually lose its appeal (and its power), you may not always be able to follow through with the threat, and you have created a negative relationship between yourself and the child. Read on about Eva – why isn’t her teacher’s response working?

_Eva, age 15, has a diagnosis of autism. She engages in rocking and finger-flicking frequently throughout the day. Her stereotypic behaviors can be distracting to her classmates, and her teacher worries that the behaviors may be interfering with Eva’s learning as well as that of her classmates. Eva’s teacher sternly tells her to stop, but the verbal demands to stop the behavior rarely work._

The positive behavior support approach encourages us to change or manipulate the things around a child that we can, to avoid triggering behavior and to respond in such a way that makes the challenging behavior ineffective for the child. But it also charges us with giving the child something useful – new, appropriate behaviors that can take the place of the challenging ones.

Imagine you are the coach of a young children’s soccer team. Likely, the players will kick the ball with their toe. A good coach will teach the children the proper way to control and pass the ball using the instep. To teach the skill, you explain the correct technique, demonstrate the correct form, and give practice time without the pressure or distractions of a game. In this calmer setting, the players gain some mastery of the skill in a non-threatening, low-risk environment, and are then more likely to use the new skill again in the higher-demand setting of a game. (Source: Lamorte, M. Learning appropriate behavior through proper practice. Children and Adults with AD/HD website, http://chaddnorcal.org)

Positive behaviors that “work” for the child are those that can give the child what she is telling you she wants or needs in an effective way. Instead of threatening loss of recess for talking out, teach the child to raise her hand and wait to be called on. You have then given her a skill that can be used in many different situations, for which you can praise or reward her (until it becomes consistent), and keeps your interactions and relationship with the child positive. Responses that help a child to learn a new skill are almost always more effective at changing behavior than ones that punish. Read on about how Eva’s teacher makes her stereotypic behaviors “work” more effectively.

_Eva’s teacher, after observing her more closely and talking to Eva’s mother, determined Eva was communicating, “It feels good to rock and flick my fingers. It helps me to soothe myself during difficult instruction.” Rather than trying to stop the behavior, Eva’s teacher decides to teach her times when it is okay to rock. Eva’s teacher uses red and green cards placed on Eva’s desk to indicate “no rocking” and “ok to rock.”_

Because Eva’s behaviors serve the purpose of calming her down, her teacher chose to teach her a new skill, following visual cue cards, that did not change the behavior itself, but instead changed when the behavior occurred – during a time that would not interfere with her learning or that of her classmates.
Not only can this new skill be used in other classes or at home, but Eva’s teacher has created a more comfortable and positive learning environment for Eva (and herself!).

Read the next article to learn more about choosing strategies, like Eva’s cue cards, to address challenging behavior. For more information about positive behavior support, visit the Positive Behavior Videos, which is a free, online resource for families, educators, and community service providers.

www.positivebehaviorvideos.org

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