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Time-In and Positive Attention

The first step in effective parenting is the establishment of parent-directed attention or “TIME-IN.” We frequently provide our children with lots of attention; however, most of it is controlled by the children instead of the parent. Children come to us and we touch them, they come to us and we talk to them, they misbehave and we go to them. However, when they are quiet and are engaging in behaviors we approve of – we ignore them. One of the most important aspects of your interaction with your children is the way you respond to their appropriate, acceptable, or desirable behaviors. Time-in is the attention you give your children when they are behaving well. Children need positive attention that includes physical contact and verbal praise from others to learn what is expected of them and to strengthen appropriate behaviors. High levels of self-confidence and self-esteem are direct products of verbal praise and well-planned, warm parent-initiated physical contact with our children.

It is very common for families to gradually reduce the amount of physical contact they experience as their children grow older. Obviously, young infants require lots of physical contact from their parents to sustain life. As infants get older and their physical needs change, they require less help and parents usually touch their children less as a result. By the time children are four years old, they are usually toilet trained, can dress and undress themselves, and bathe themselves. Therefore, it is important for you to put forth an effort to keep in physical contact with your children as they grow. Fortunately, there are several things you can do to help offset these natural changes in the amount of physical contact you have with your children:

1. Increase Physical Proximity. During various activities, place your child close to you where it is easy to reach him/her. At dinner, in the car, in a restaurant, when you have company, or when you are in a shopping mall, keep your children near you so that physical contact requires little, if any, additional effort on your part.
2. Apply Parent-Directed Physical Contact. Frequent and brief (one or two seconds) touching will do more to teach your children that you love them, approve of them, like what they are doing and that they are safe more than by just telling them. Discipline yourself to touch your children at least 10 to 15 times a day. Specifically, touch your children any time they are doing something correct, or something you would like to see occur more often. They will understand your approval without any verbal comment from you.
3. Eliminate Verbal Reprimands. Adults often send messages that children do not understand or find confusing. Children often view verbal reprimands, nagging, pleading, and yelling as signs that their parents do not like them. Always keep in mind the old expression, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.”

4. Encourage Independent Playtime. Children need to have time to themselves – time when they can play, listen to music, look at a book, or look out a window. During these times of independence, you can provide your children with subtle encouragements by providing brief physical touching (e.g., pats on the head or a hug) every so often – without interrupting what your children are doing. This will be difficult at first, but you will get the hang of it with practice.

Encouraging appropriate child behavior through praise can take many forms, including general praise comments (i.e., nice, good, great, awesome, etc.), descriptive praise (i.e., “You were very patient while I was on the telephone”; “Wow, you cleaned up your room all by yourself”), feedback on performance (i.e., right, that’s correct, perfect), recruitment of praise from others (i.e., “Show this math paper to your dad”), and expression of thanks (i.e., “I appreciate that”; that was very nice of you.”).

Your praise can be very effective or ineffective, depending on how and when it is used. Remember the I-FEED rules as an acronym to help you use your verbal positive attention most effectively. I-FEED stands for ImmEDIATELY, FREQUENTLY, ENTHUSIASTICALLY, EYE CONTACT, and DESCRIBING the behavior.

1. Praise your children **immediately** when they are doing something that pleases you. When you praise your children, say exactly what the children are doing that pleases you. Promise activities, such as 20 minutes of playing a game with you, or rewards, such as snacks, only if you can follow through on your promise. Whenever immediate praise is not possible, it can be very powerful to review at bedtime with your children the positive behavior you observed or heard about and how that behavior represents a life skill you are teaching your children (e.g., kindness, tolerance, spirituality, work ethic, etc.).
2. Check on your children **frequently** so you have lots of chances to “catch good behavior.” At first, check on an older child every 10 minutes or so. Then slowly add a couple of minutes at a time to how long you wait until you check again. Slowly get to the point where you check the child only every 30 minutes or so. You will need to check younger children even more often. At first, check every 5 minutes. Then slowly add a minute or so to how long you wait before checking again. With a young child, never leave the child longer than 10 minutes without checking to be sure everything is okay.
3. Do not leave your children alone by ignoring calm, pleasing behaviors. Do not fall into the trap that you do not want to disturb or interrupt your children. For example, if your children do something you like and you do not praise them, they will learn that, if they behave themselves, mom and dad will ignore them. Maintain **eye contact** with your children while delivering the praise increases the sincerity of the praise. When you give your children a nice bit of attention for good behavior, you are teaching them that good behavior gets more attention than bad behavior.
4. Keep your praise brief, but use an **enthusiastic** voice tone. At first, younger children may stop their play and they may try to talk with you when you give them attention for their behavior. After a short time, your attention will not interrupt their play if your praise is brief (i.e., 5-10 seconds). Often **describe specifically** what was desirable about the behavior. It is best to “catch them” being good several times a day, each time spending just a few seconds praising a specific behavior that pleases you.
5. Ignore inappropriate behavior unless it warrants a time-out. For example, if your child knocks over the blocks while playing, ignore it. As soon as possible, catch an appropriate behavior and praise it. If she throws a block at her brother, place her in time-out.