

Difficult behaviour in young children

by Doctor Jo Jones, Paediatrician – www.healthcare4kids.co.uk

Paediatricians see a lot of children with behavioural problems as these can make life at home and school utterly miserable. Why do so many parents struggle with young children's behaviour?

I can think of a few reasons why. Some parents are so exhaustedly keen for a quiet life that it's easier to turn a blind eye to atrocious behaviour, hoping that it will melt away when the child is older (fat chance). Others feel so constrained by all the 'Do nots!' floating about, that they quite understandably wonder what is it that they can do that won't 'scar' their child for evermore.

I've certainly met a few of the classic behaviour stunts in my own children – the daughter who screamed daily at bedtime until she vomited (not much fun with tongue and groove flooring), one child's 'steady but blank gaze as she did exactly the opposite of what I'd asked, and, memorably, my eldest screaming at full volume whilst thundering her head and feet against Tesco's floor, whilst half the onlookers thought "What an hideous child!" and the other half thought, "What an appalling mother...". My small son's current bit of fun is 'let's go round hitting everyone with a stick', which, when combined with an insolent gaze on reprimand, is guaranteed to make my blood boil.

Children of differing ages need differing techniques. Small children under 3 are perhaps the hardest as reward charts are rarely effective. Very young children simply don't understand the concept of being good to earn a treat, but certainly know the power of mammoth displays of rage. In those situations, the most effective technique is to 'remove the audience'. It's extraordinary how effective simply walking away can be with a cool, "When you've stopped all that silliness, we'll play" BUT, you actually have to walk away, out of sight, giving you a chance to cool down whilst the child begins to feel silly (this was the trick I tried in Tesco's, hence the 'appalling mother' bit, as I "abandoned my child" for all of 10 seconds). Thuggish behaviour needs to be swiftly dealt with by removing the child plus or minus implement from the fun and making them sit it out for a few minutes

(those sticks by the way are currently on top of the fridge) – repeatedly if necessary.

For young children over 3, a 'chunked' reward chart works really well, where the day is split up into e.g. 5 sections. The child needs to produce 'good enough' behaviour through each section of the day, with the aim of earning a point per section. 5 points mean a reward - something that the child has chosen which is cheap enough to have every day but crucially, something they really, really want. If the child is not motivated, they'll quickly lose interest and stop behaving well. You need to think what gets your child excited (don't underestimate the power of a kick about with Dad in the garden), and then use it as a 'carrot'. If they don't get the points, a simple "Never mind, let's try again tomorrow" minimises a child's sense of failure but maximises determination to do better the next day, especially with reminders.

This system does not work if the parent is not consistent. Some parents give up at the child's first screech of fury as the magical top marks are not achieved, and say something like, "OK, OK, you can have it...". Cue small child who thinks, "Brilliant!...all I have to do next time is to kick up a massive fuss and she'll give in!" So, unsurprisingly, they do just that... Or, equally unhelpful, the parent who is so keen not to give in, that they cancel every single point because of a teeny misdemeanour at the end of the day.

Many parents have said to me, "Oh, reward charts – they don't work!" Actually, they absolutely do, but they go hand in hand with parental consistency and a motivated child, which means taking a deep breath and understanding what really makes your child tick.