

PWS Behavior Management Skills 101

Masters At Work

One quiet Sunday morning 6-year-old Bobby erupts over a small disappointment and, screaming, sweeps books, magazines, the remote control and a coffee cup off of a table and onto the floor. His father, Dave, Master of Low Expressed Emotion, ignores the mess and wordlessly swoops in to pick up Bobby and deposit him in the hallway where the boy continues to tantrum. His father waits silently and repeatedly but wordlessly blocks Bobby's path when he attempts to return to the room. His only comment: "This is a better place for you to calm down," is repeated at intervals with the exact same matter-of-fact tone. Other than that, Dave remains a silent presence as Bobby gradually begins to calm. Dave waits until Bobby is quiet and suggests that they go inside to clean up the mess which Carla, Bobby's mother, has carefully left untouched. She is nowhere in sight while Dave handles the situation. Later, Bobby was informed with sympathy by Carla that he did not earn his star for staying calm that morning but he can still earn one for the afternoon.

Basic Skills Training

Your 3 Most Valuable Behavior Skills

- ❖ **Low Attention**
- ❖ **Low Expressed Emotion**
- ❖ **Not Arguing**

Dave and Carla's deft handling of Bobby did not come automatically. They probably tried lots of other approaches before developing their well-choreographed response to Bobby's behavior. Maybe they were able to find good professional help to guide them through these episodes.

It is important that you pay attention to the concepts taught here and keep them in mind as you observe your child and yourselves in action. The concepts and techniques in this chapter are relevant and useful for children of all levels of ability but will need to be implemented with each child's individual characteristics kept in mind. Intelligence, language skills and physical size are major factors influencing how the same behaviors might need to be handled differently in different children.

1. Low Attention

Low attention to undesirable behaviors is critical in children of all developmental levels. It assures that you are not inadvertently reinforcing an undesirable behavior. Even for low functioning children with poor language skills it may be your main tool for extinguishing a behavior. Even when behaviors are not fully extinguished, you can be certain that low attention to the behavior is the *least* reinforcing strategy. Parents are often told to ignore behaviors but this not quite accurate. Most behaviors should be *apparently* ignored. That is, *from the child's point of view*, the behavior provokes little response. This is counterintuitive to the parent who feels that he or she must "nip it in the bud". Many behaviors will extinguish themselves when they provoke no response. For many parents, this may go against the grain but it works far better than reacting to the behavior. Parent may object: that the child "knows better" or that he cannot let the child "get away with it". These thoughts or attitudes interfere with good behavior management but they are hard to resist or to train out of some parents and/or grandparents. This approach is just as effective in normal IQ teens as it is in young nonverbal children.

The alternative to LOW ATTENTION to a behavior is REACTING to the behavior. What are your choices? Yelling, screaming, scolding, crying, threatening, pronouncing punishments (There is a right and wrong way to do this.), not to mention hitting, smacking, spanking ... the list goes on but as you can see none of these are going to be very productive. Most of them are quite counterproductive, they work against you. Why is this so?

- They make the child even more emotionally out of control
- They show the child that you are emotionally out of control
- They teach the child behaviors you do not want him to imitate
- They give the child control over *your* behavior
- They give attention to the behavior and therefore reinforce it.

“The sun won’t set on this behavior.”

Use this mantra to remind yourself that low attention to the behavior *at the time of the behavior* does not mean that the child “gets away with it”.

Low attention to the behavior is only the first step but it is a very necessary step. The parent must keep in mind that the behavior may or may not need to be dealt with later. The parent might remind himself "The sun won't set on this behavior". This means that some action will be taken by the end of the day to discourage the behavior or to encourage a different behavior. When and how to do this will be discussed later. Even when behavior is dangerous or destructive, low attention to the actual

behavior is the most effective response. This means that the parent may intervene with the behavior without actually speaking about the behavior. If the child is hitting another child, one of the children should be removed. Usually it is better to give attention to the victim than attention to the aggressor but removing either child is effective. At this moment "who started it" should not be addressed.

If a child is destructive toward property, it is usually more effective to remove the property from his reach or to block his access to it with your body rather than to try to stop the child physically from his destructive behavior. Other times, with a small child, he can simply be removed. Much of this should be done *wordlessly*. This is very counterintuitive but the sooner the incident ends and the less emotional and verbal reaction from the parent, the less the behavior will be reinforced for future events. This may include temporarily ignoring overturned furniture or broken objects. Attention to these events allows the situation to escalate and the child, not the parent gains control.

“To Ignore or Not to Ignore” is NOT the question.

Rather, the question that is often not addressed is HOW to ignore a particularly dangerous or obnoxious behavior. Parents struggle with this and are given inadequate guidance. Watching Pros at work can bring it home.

Dewey, a very big boy, was sitting in a stairwell at his school bellowing loudly. No one was in sight but I knew better. Taking a guess I silently step

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over Dewey and go to the next landing. Pushing open the door I encounter 3 school staff hovering just outside the stairwell. Which one of you is ignoring Dewey?" I ask. "It takes a village to ignore Dewey", comes the reply.

Indeed it can. In a well-oiled behavior program at schools and other facilities, everyone has developed the art of low attention to behaviors that elsewhere would typically provoke scolding, bargaining, threats, punishment, bribery or just gawking. In behaviorally-literate setting, the behavior evokes as little response as possible.

It may appear to the outsider that nothing is happening but in fact a great deal is happening. Dewey is learning that his greatest weapons, bellowing and making threats, are ineffective. He will be more predisposed to accept the new coping skills being taught to him as he gives up his old, now ineffective, ways of getting what he needs or wants. In the meantime, staff are nearby, out of sight, ready to intervene if Dewey decides to leave the premises, hurt himself or someone else. Past experience with Dewey gives them the confidence to watch from a distance; Dewey is all bellow and no action.

Sometimes, as in the case of Dewey, both the child and the behavior are being ignored. At other times only the behavior is ignored: the child may need a hands-on response as performed by Dave with Bobby. This is done with as few words as possible avoiding eye contact. Restraint of a young child can generally be done safely but restraint of larger persons is more likely to result in injury to someone and requires some training.

WHAT ABOUT DISRESPECT?

Disrespect, back talk and even foul language usually occur in the context of another disagreement. If the parent ignores these behaviors and stays on message, HE or SHE remains in charge. If the parent becomes enraged, scolds or punishes the child, then the child has set the agenda and the parent has lost control of the proceedings. The parent has in effect empowered the disrespect or bad language.

If disrespect is infrequent or foul language is new, the parent does well not to acknowledge the behavior at the time it occurs and maybe not at all. If the problem is a recurrent one the parent may LATER ask for an apology and issue a known consequence or most effectively, include "respecting others" in the child's behavior plan.

MASTERS AT WORK:

Where's Carla?

When Bobby's outburst begins Carla suddenly remembers it is time to do her nails. Her "disappearance" serves well. Bobby is probably more reinforced by Carla's attention than any other person. The fewer spectators the better, and Carla's absence, even if not usually practical, above all is desirable. Most children with special needs have some processing difficulties, including high functioning autistic spectrum children. Even if managing an outburst requires 2 or more persons, it is preferable that only 1 person be actually interacting with the child, in order to keep messaging simple and clear and to prevent overload from more than one person giving instructions.

2. Low Expressed Emotion/"The HyperREactive Child"

Low expressed emotion is used virtually at all times. It has the benefit of reducing outbursts, not fueling an ongoing outburst and of calmly encouraging a child to move on from his outburst.

Low expressed emotion is not easy to do. Low expressed emotion begins with saying as little as possible especially when a child is angry. What *is* said is said in a calm, firm, matter-of-fact tone. The *content* is **what you want the child to be doing instead of what he is doing**. There are no magic words to stop a tantrum or change the mood especially when a child is angry. Well-chosen words giving a simple instruction often need to be spoken several times over. The difficult challenge is to repeat yourself without changing your tone. Emotional tone or too many different instructions or comments make it difficult for a child to process or focus on your main message. Pick your message and stick to it. And remember: Silence is an important option when a child is still distraught.

MASTERS AT WORK

Dave remains a silent presence as Bobby gradually begins to calm. Some things Dave might say:

“We need to clean up in there; I will help you.”

“After we clean up we can go out on the swings”

These are all ways of NOT addressing the negative destructive behavior directly. Dave is changing the subject, moving Bobby on and in the process giving him an unspoken way to redeem himself.

For some children cleaning up is too much to ask and they erupt all over again. The parent must make a judgment as to whether it will be easier to move the child on to another activity altogether and allow the mess to disappear in the background. Other children may do best if they move on to another event or activity and are returned to clean up later. In this scenario, Carla may quietly clean up the spilled coffee while Bobby is tantruming and leave the magazines and other items for him to pick up with his Dad.

What is said is crucial. When a child is misbehaving or angry, the only words parent should speak, should be addressed to what the parent wants the child to do right at that moment. This is called **redirection** and it does not include scolding or correction.

- ❖ “Come with me” is better than "Go to your room" because it is more neutral and is less likely to create an emotional response
- ❖ "Come with me" is better than "Stop that and come with me" because it gives less attention to the negative behavior.
- ❖ "Let's do something else now" is better than “If you cannot play nicely with the blocks we will have to do something else now" because it gives less attention to the unwanted behavior
- ❖ Let's go play with the play-dough now" is better than “Let's go do something else" because it is more specific and distracts the child to the new activity
- ❖ "I am not going to talk about it anymore" is better than “I told you ‘no’" because it is less confrontational.
- ❖ “We’ll talk about it later” is better than “Don’t use that tone with me.” Because it gives low attention to the behavior and is less confrontational.

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- ❖ “I want you to help me set the table now” is better than “we’re not going to talk about it anymore” because it distracts the child and is more specific.
- ❖ “Can you tell me what happened?” is better than “Why did you do that?” because it is less confrontational and provides the child with an invitation to explain his experience of the incident.

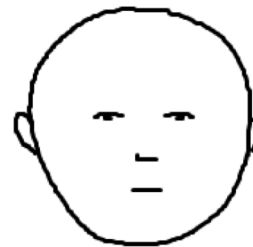
The second part of low expressed emotion are volume and tone. They are different and both must be consciously modified to perform low expressed emotion effectively.

Volume should be as soft as possible and still be heard. Tone is the biggest challenge but also the most important quality of your voice to master. We convey our stress and emotion, particularly anger, in our tone. Many adults are used to using a sharp angry scolding voice to get their children to obey. Many children will obey but for those who do not, more scolding is not going to work either. Many children react to this tone with anger and escalate into angry disrespectful outbursts. Most children, who can, complain about being “yelled at”. They are not talking about volume, but tone. Some children refer to a parent’s or teacher’s “mean voice”. They are talking about tone.

The more a parent can maintain a calm matter-of-fact tone in the face of negative behavior including verbal or physical aggression, the more the parent, rather than the child, will remain in control of the situation. When the parent starts using an angry tone or raising his or her voice, the child is in control rather than the parent. No matter what the child is doing, if you can manage your own voice you are in control, not the child.

Your FACE

To be a real master of low expressed emotion you must control your facial expression as well as your voice. Unless you are speaking to the child, eyes should be turned anywhere except on the misbehaving child (low attention) and your face should look **BORED**. The more outrageous a child’s behavior, the more bored you should look and sound. (low expressed emotion).



Are You “Yelling” ? A Glossary Of Terms

Low Expressed Emotion refers to the elimination of emotion from content and well as from the delivery of your message. The message is much better processed in the absence of emotional signals in your voice, face or demeanor. This low expressed emotion refers primarily to anger but includes surprise, shock or alarm all of which can agitate a sensitive child and aggravate an emergency situation. Positive emotions, on the other hand, may be expressed and even exaggerated when appropriate.

Volume = how loudly you are speaking; loud volume alone may provoke a sensitive child but usually children are reacting to angry tone. Low volume and matter of fact tone are easier to produce if the parent moves in close to the child before speaking.

Tone = consists of many speech changes such as inflection that convey emotion

Emphasis on certain words can contribute to angry tone: I want you to come down here.” Is different from “I want you to come down here.”

Stern = angry tone

Scolding = angry tone plus focus on the undesirable behavior

Matter-of fact/firm tone- conveys neutral emotion and is a critical skill for handling a distressed or angry child.

Basic Skill Number 3 NOT ARGUING

Judges, generals and emperors do not argue. Neither should parents. While lots of us may enjoy a lively discussion on the existence or nonexistence of the paranormal, man-made global warming or the future of baseball in Pittsburgh, we are generally better off not arguing with our children about issues under our authority. In doing so we undermine our own authority. The temptation to argue is enormous, especially if you are good at it. But **NOT ARGUING** is an essential parenting skill and should not be overlooked. It is a real act of humility to let your child’s easily refuted point pass by like a bad pitch when you know that you could hit it over center field and out of the park. If you respond to your child’s arguments with a counter argument you are stepping into quicksand. By arguing

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back, you legitimize your child's *arguing* even as you think that you are refuting his *argument*. Tricky stuff!

NOT ARGUING sounds something like this:

PARENT: Martha, please take your dishes into the kitchen.

MARTHA: ! You always pick on me! Mary didn't bring out her dishes!

Comment: Martha has presented you with not one but two arguments. Brace yourself.

PARENT REPORT CARDS

Reply #1

PARENT: Don't talk to me that way. I do not always pick on you. Mary will bring in her dishes; she usually does. Go to your room!

Comment: Parent has been pulled off message by reacting to Martha's language and tone. Further, parent has responded to both arguments, thereby legitimizing the arguing. Martha is likely to respond with more arguing. Parent is getting a little testy!

Grade **F**

Reply #2

PARENT: Good point, why don't you bring in Mary's dishes as well?

Comment: Very clever but this could be expensive. Rather than teaching Martha not to argue it still acknowledges her argument. Further, Martha is unlikely to see any humor in this and could escalate.

Grade **C-** (points for not losing your cool)

Reply #3

PARENT: I would like you to bring in your dishes, please.

Comment: Parent has ignored both arguments as well as bad language and stays on message.

Grade **A+**

Q. How do I know if its his PWS, puberty (etc.) or is he just being a little JERK?

A. It does not matter. You use the same skills regardless.