

Lighthearted, Subversive, and Really Cool Ways to Improve Your Children's Behavior at Home and Have Fun, II



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As you may have noticed from my first article on lighthearted and subversive behavior management, my wacky behavioral fixes each have a name, use props, and involve doing something. The name allows you, the parent, to mention them in conversation. The props are a way of visually evoking them for your child (words may not be necessary). And the activity involved in each one ensures that the learning experience finds a place in your child's behavioral database.

We remember things we see better than things we hear, and we remember things we do best of all. The interventions discussed below can be combined, as appropriate, with those described in the first article. As before, everyone needs to know what to expect in advance, and humor is key. In almost all cases, these tactics teach children about respect for others.

Silver Rule

When children have trouble respecting the physical space of others, try establishing a rule that at least twelve inches must separate people from each other.

Driving instructors teach learners to keep a doughnut of space around their cars when they are on the road in order to ensure that they can brake or maneuver if another driver swerves, stops suddenly, or has an accident. By the same token, children need to show and demand respect for personal space.

To facilitate the learning process, you can appoint a deputy (see my first article on lighthearted and subversive interventions) and provide a carpenter's folding rule (possibly with a pocket or holster). The deputy then becomes responsible for warning anyone whose body violates the boundary. You can call on the deputy for help any time you spot a problem situation in the making. (You can also have

fruitful discussions about exceptions to the rule—for handshakes and hugs, for instance—to develop awareness of social conventions in this area.)

Sign of Empathy

Some children who have a hard time putting themselves in other people's shoes may routinely engage in insults and name-calling: "You're fat! You're ugly! You're stupid!" In preparation for this intervention, which can be used at home or at school, you will need a few markers, a few lengths of string, and pieces of shirt cardboard (lightweight and white on one side), all parked in a central, readily accessible location. The string can be attached to the shirt cardboard with a stapler, or you can tie each end to adjacent corners in which holes have been punched.

Once your supplies are in order, you will explain that anyone who indulges in insults or name-calling must make a sign owning the insult. So, for example, a child who called someone else fat, ugly, or stupid would make a sign reading: "I am fat," "I am ugly," or "I am stupid." The offender can wear the sign for a while but should not be asked to do so for more than a few hours or one day (your point is made when the sign is created, and the actual wearing can be brief).

Most children will object so strenuously to hanging such a sign around their necks that you will probably need only to mention the intervention from time to time.

Twenty-five-Cent Solution

Many families have a problem behavior that is exhibited at one time or another by almost everyone and that bothers everyone pretty much equally. Examples are yelling, swearing, and the use of foul language. To use this intervention, you need a large glass jar with a lid. You explain at a family meeting that, from now on, your house is a no-yell zone (or that your home is off limits for bad language) and that anyone caught breaking this rule will be fined and required to pay a set amount of money into the jar.

At the end of the week, the money in the jar must be used for some treat that can be enjoyed by the whole family. The idea is that the bad behavior is an offense against the family and that the treat, financed by the offender, restores good feeling and reaffirms family values. This intervention appeals to small children because it allows them to point the finger at grownups rather than just vice versa. Fines can be as little as twenty-five cents or as much as one dollar—or you can use raffle tickets for which offenders must pay.

Listen Up

This intervention helps children understand how people feel about loud noise. When unnecessary noise wakes family members too early on a Sunday morning, or when music blares at some other time of day, require the offender to don

headphones and listen to music that he or she finds distasteful. So, for instance, a rap aficionado might be required to listen to Beethoven or to opera (you get the idea).

Payday

In some families, one child constantly breaks household rules while another is an angel. Offenders sometimes explain that they have no control over the problem behavior, but you may suspect otherwise. To test your hypothesis, tell your constituents that you will pay the law-abiding sibling one dollar any time there's an infraction of the rules. This is an equal opportunity intervention: offenders who have mended their ways can qualify for payment if the angel falls from grace. Most children hate to be deprived of a benefit they see their siblings getting.

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