

IMPROVING BEHAVIOR

A variety of simple techniques can positively influence and calm childhood behavior. These techniques add structure to a child's day, reduce stress in the home environment, and encourage concentration, good daily health and nutrition. Trying them out can only help the situation.

Establish a fixed daily routine

Children benefit from consistency in day-to-day routines. Make sure there is a predictable pattern to your child's day. Follow a regular schedule from wake-up time to school/day care, to meal times and end-of-day rituals and bedtime. To the extent possible, follow the same routine every day.

Improve your family's diet

Adjust your meal habits to decrease intake of sugar and caffeine over the course of the day. Reduce or eliminate soda pop and juice, substituting water, especially late in the day. Increase the variety of foods you eat. Set and keep to a standard family mealtime.

Reject negativity

Force yourself to react resolutely positively with your child, even when the behavior is offensive, unacceptable, indefensible, hurtful, and wrong. The best approach is always to act calmly and controlled. Make sure the situation is kept safe, but do not react by escalating the situation. Yelling and name-calling make things worse. Remember that stress is poison to kids with mental health problems, so it makes sense to use discipline strategies that are calming instead of stressful. You want your child to learn control, and to see the benefits of remaining in control. This is not to say that you should not intervene. However, the response should be measured, and should always include an opportunity for the child to "process" the discipline. The basis for positive discipline techniques is a ritual of measured confrontation that interrupts the behavior and requires the child not only to "think about it" but also to express what was wrong, and apologize for it. There are many useful books on child discipline. Just remember that your point is to help your child learn control, and if there is a mental health problem, then learning control may be very difficult indeed.

Simplify the child's environment

Clutter and distraction can stress out children with mental health issues, and make it more difficult for them to think calmly or rest at the end of the day. Move TVs, computers, video game systems, cell phones and other "screens" out of the child's bedroom. Do not make this seem like punishment. Provide alternate places and times for the child to have access to these items. Tell the child that you simply want to provide a safe place that makes it easier for the child to feel restful and in control.

Lower the stress level at school

Tell teachers that you understand their concerns and are working to resolve the problem. If homework is a problem, carve out homework time each day and regulate it with a timer. It is better and easier to give all your attention directly to a child for one-half hour of homework time, than it is to force a child to wrestle with it for hours on end while you remain half-engaged yet vigilant. Besides, practically every child shares your desire to have the homework completed. Work on accomplishing more of it each day.

Recognize what your child achieves

Your child needs to experience your love, approval, and support.

All these techniques increase a child's sense of self-control, while reducing the burden of negative emotions and stress. These techniques are also safe, free, and harmless. They can be surprisingly effective.

It takes about 3 weeks to change a habit. Expect it to take that long before behavioral issues improve. Above all, do not be over-worried about keeping a perfect schedule, or the cleanest room, or the most rigorous diet, or even about becoming upset when things don't work out. You are simply trying to do as well as you can.

You are trying to "build up" a resilient, successful child, not "tear down" a problem.

An excerpt from *Defying Mental Illness: Finding Recovery with Community Resources and Family Support 2014 Edition*, by Paul Komarek and Andrea Schroer. Copyright ©2013 Human Intervention LLC.