

Helping Children Behave Well

In the men's washrooms in Amsterdam's airport, there is a fake fly etched into the porcelain urinals, right at the spot on the bowl where the water carries everything down. Designers have found a way to reduce splashback and cut cleaning costs by 80% by taking advantage of an apparently natural urge to aim. This is called "human factor engineering": looking at how people normally behave and then changing aspects of the environment and the routine to get them to do what you want. Parents can use the same principles to help their children have good behaviour.

Environment

Here are a few examples of how parents have arranged equipment, furniture and fixtures to help children behave well. These ideas might inspire you to think about what would work in your home. Whenever you can, involve your children in making the changes. You can turn many of the activities into fun family craft projects. And when children have participated in the set-up, they are more likely to pay attention to the new "cues" that are telling them what you expect.

- Provide shelves to put away toys and books that are at the right height for children. Put hooks to hang up clothes, school bags and wash cloths where they're easy to reach.
- If you want all the blocks to go back into one container, tape a picture of the blocks on the side of the box, where children can easily pick it out on the shelf.
- If children find it hard to put everything away after playing, maybe there are too many toys out at one time. Put some toys and games away for awhile and rotate them every month or so.
- If you expect children to put their shoes and boots in a particular place by the door, trace around the soles, cut out the footprints and tape them to the floor, a concrete signal of your expectations.
- You can help young children stay away from things you don't want them to touch (like the dog food dish or the garbage can) by putting tape on the floor in a square around the forbidden item. Little ones have a hard time controlling their impulses, and the

line on the floor is a visual reminder to stop and think before they act. Tape on the floor at doorways can also be a reminder of a rule like, "Juice stays in the kitchen; it can't go over the line."

- Playgroup organizers know that an empty space in the middle of a long room just seems to cry out "Run here!" If the rule is "Walk!," why not arrange the equipment and furniture to break up the space?

Routine

Bedtime, meals, naps and mornings go more smoothly when they are structured by a familiar routine. Children feel more secure and find it easier to follow rules when things happen in the same order every day. Here are some suggestions for building routines.

- Adults use a clock to structure routines, but young children need other cues they can understand. Try playing music or singing a song to announce a change of activity. If the song starts, "Now it's time to put away toys..." make the last line "and wash our hands for snack!" That focusses children on the next step in the routine.
- You can also create a visual reminder of a routine. Make a poster with the child, cutting and gluing pictures of a toothbrush, a washcloth and soap, pyjamas, bed, a book and a big heart for a hug and kiss goodnight.
- Leave lots of time to complete the routine. When children are rushed, they get anxious and it becomes harder for them to concentrate on behaving well.
- Adjust the routine to fit your children's needs: feed them before they get too hungry, put them down to sleep before they get too tired. Don't forget to provide lots of time for active play every day, outdoors if possible.
- Children are motivated by a natural urge to play so look for ways you can build games into your routine.

Less struggle, more fun

When you pay attention to your children's "human factors," you can organize your living space and your routine in ways that make life go more smoothly for your whole family. Your children will find it easier to learn self-control and you can spend more time on the fun part of being a parent.

by Betsy Mann