

Strategies for Supporting Your Child's Success at Home



An audio version of this document is available on the Autism Learning Partnership's YouTube channel.

This resource provides a variety of possible strategies or changes to your family's daily routine that may help to prevent some common challenges or barriers to family well-being. Implementing some of these strategies can help support positive behaviours and prevent frustration or challenging behaviours. Sometimes, all it takes is a small change to solve a big problem!

Catch Them Being Good

COVID-19 has probably significantly increased the time your family spends at home. As a result of this increase, you may find yourself saying things like, "Share with your brother.", "Don't touch that!", or "Not right now." more often than usual. But have you ever paid attention to how often you praise your child's good behaviour in a day? Generally, adults tend to quickly step in when children are doing something they are not supposed to do, but not as often when they are doing something appropriate or expected. Going out of your way to notice and praise good behaviour is a great way to ensure that these good behaviours continue or even increase. The goal is to praise a lot more than to reprimand or correct. This ensures that your interactions with your child are more often positive than not, which can improve the atmosphere in your household and lead to more good behaviours. Be really specific about what you say in your verbal praise. An example is to say, "Thank you for doing a puzzle while I was on the phone." rather than just saying, "Thank you." This ensures that your child knows exactly what they did right which will increase the probability that they will do it again in the future.

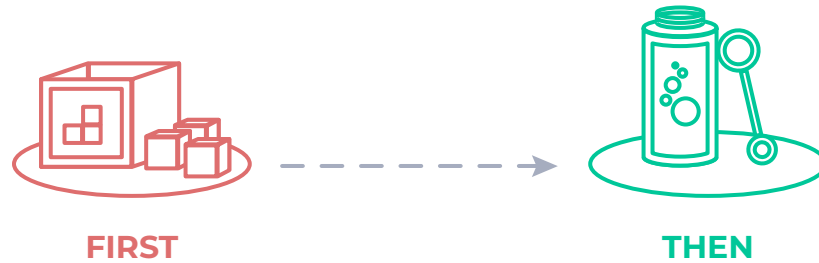


Tip to get started with this strategy

Keep a pencil and paper with you at all times for one day to keep a tally of the number of times you praise your child and the number of times you redirect their behaviour or reprimand them. Give yourself the goal of giving at least four times more praise than reprimands.

Use the First/Then Rule

Remember the times in your childhood when you were told, “First eat your vegetables and then you can have your dessert.”? This strategy is actually supported by science! By using it, you can have your child complete a non-preferred task or activity by offering them an opportunity to do something they prefer once they are finished. For example, “First clean up the blocks and then you can play with bubbles.”



Tip to get started with this strategy

Identify a non-preferred task or activity and an item or an activity that your child prefers. Structure your sentence in a first/then way, using a positive language. Say, “First let’s clean up and then we will play with bubbles” instead of saying, “If you leave the blocks on the floor, then you won’t be able to play with bubbles.” Once your child completes the activity, give them the preferred item or allow them to do the activity they like.

Strategically Plan the Order of the Day’s Events

The First/Then Rule applies to specific instructions but can also be used to promote a positive flow to the entire day. By strategically planning the day’s events so that a preferred activity takes place after a less preferred activity, the probability that your child will participate in the non-preferred activity increases. For example, if your child does not like getting dressed in the morning but loves eating breakfast, instead of having your child eat breakfast first (preferred) and then getting dressed (non-preferred), you can change the order of these two events so that getting dressed happens first and then breakfast.

Tip to get started with this strategy

Review or write down the activities and tasks that your child typically does from the time they get up to when they go to bed and identify the ones that are the most challenging. As much as possible, rearrange the order of these activities so that a pleasant or preferred activity occurs after each less preferred/challenging activity.

Maximize Versus Minimize

Think about what happens after your child's positive behaviours and what happens after their problematic behaviours. Which one gets the biggest results?

Reinforcement is a great tool when it increases a skill or a behaviour that we want to happen more often. However, it can also unintentionally increase an undesired behaviour. Sometimes, we react to challenging behaviours in a certain way thinking that this will make the behaviours stop, yet they continue to happen. That's when we know that reinforcement may be at play, even though it's not what we wanted to happen. This means that we need to be strategic about what we reinforce and how we reinforce.



Maximize your reaction to positive behaviours (e.g., give your child lots of attention, access to preferred toys, or a special treat, etc.) and minimize your reaction for challenging behaviours. This does not necessarily mean not responding at all to challenging behaviours, as this can sometimes be dangerous and cause more problems than the initial challenging behaviour, but it means controlling your response to the behaviour by avoiding giving it a big reaction. In these situations, remain calm, use a quiet voice, take a deep breath and use non-threatening body language.

Tip to get started with this strategy

Identify one behaviour that you would like to see happen more often. Select something your child already knows how to do that you'd like to see more of. Make sure that the behaviour helps your child in some way and is something that they are interested in. Then, decide how you are going to respond when the behaviour occurs by identifying what you are going to say, do and give when the behaviour you want to see occurs.

Reserve Reinforcers

Have you ever noticed that something is more of a treat if you haven't had it in a while? The same concept applies to reinforcement. A reinforcer is more effective if it is something that your child wants but has limited access to; like a "treat". For example, if playing a specific game is reinforcing for your child, leaving that game out at all times will decrease the effectiveness of the game as a reinforcer. But, if you tuck the game away and reserve it to reward home learning or practicing a new skill, you increase the value of the reinforcer for your child.



Tip to get started with this strategy

Think of one thing that your child considers a treat. Try tucking it away for a day or two and then notice if its value increases for your child when you bring it out again.

Incorporate Routines and Structure in the Day

Many children cope best when routines are consistent. Routines provide comfort by helping your child know what to expect and changes to that routine can sometimes lead to behavioural problems. Physical distancing means that changes to your child's routines are probably unavoidable. You can help support your child by maintaining the routines that can stay the same, such as a consistent lunch time and a consistent bedtime routine. Establishing new routines can also help provide some structure, support positive interaction with others, and manage time for structured activities and free play. New routines can include activities directed by you, other adults, or siblings and free play/sensory activities that don't require interaction with others. Mix indoor with outdoor tasks and activities while still following physical distancing guidelines. Keep expectations simple and be sure to provide your child with lots of positive feedback about their participation and cooperation.



Tip to get started with this strategy

Pick one moment in the day that you would like to be more structured and slowly build in familiar activities during that time or build in new activities by slowly expanding the length of time your child spends doing things that are less familiar.

Offer Visual Support

Your child may not always understand what you want them to do, even if you say it very clearly and regularly and you know they know how to do it. This can be frustrating. Some children understand better when you show them what they should be doing instead of just saying it. Incorporating visuals in your child's day can help them see what is expected of them as well as better understand what is coming up. Examples of visual supports are visual schedules, pictures, or visual timers, etc. For more information on using visual schedules and visual timers, read the online resource or watch the video on "Creating Structure and Providing Support During COVID-19" created by the Autism Learning Partnership.



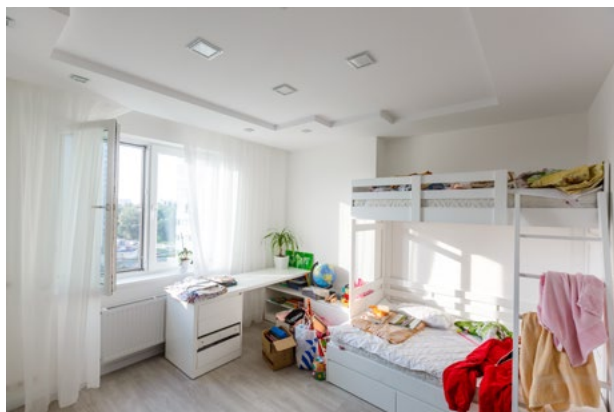
Tip to get started with this strategy

Pick one part of your child's day that is particularly challenging and create a visual schedule with pictures or items representing each activity or task that is part of the routine. For example, if the bedtime routine is challenging, you could create a visual schedule that shows the steps in that routine (e.g., taking a bath, brushing teeth, reading a book, going to the bathroom and going to bed).

Adapt the Child's Environment

Making even small adaptations to your child's environment is often a simple proactive measure that can provide good results. This means changing something in the environment that is either going to make it easier or more likely for your child to engage in an appropriate behaviour and/or make it less likely that they will engage in a challenging behaviour. Examples of adaptations include:

- Find doubles of highly preferred toys to prevent sharing struggles;
- Put items you don't want your child to have out of sight and only bring them out when they are available;
- Limit access to materials and activities associated with challenging behaviour; and
- Reduce the effort needed to engage in an appropriate behaviour by making the needed materials easily accessible (e.g., place your child's outdoor clothes and shoes in one bin close to the door).



Tip to get started with this strategy

Think about a time when your child may be the least cooperative. Scan the environment around them during this time thinking, "How could I arrange this area differently to decrease the chance of challenging behaviour?"

Build Choices in Your Child's Day

Do you perform best when you have a say in what you are going to do rather than when a decision is made for you? Most people prefer choice, children included. Offering your child choices helps them have more control over what happens in their day and you both have some control over the outcome. Offering choices makes it more likely that your child will engage in a desired behaviour rather than in a challenging behaviour. This strategy can be easily customized based on your child's needs and preferences. For example, you may adapt the number of options they can choose from or pair the options with visuals.



Tip to get started with this strategy

Today, go out of your way to offer choices to your child. Strive to offer one choice-making opportunity during each different routine of your child's day (e.g., breakfast, free play, outside activity, etc.).

Model Self-Regulation

Having the ability to self-regulate means being able to manage a flexible range of emotional and behavioural responses to what is going on around you. COVID-19 has brought its share of uncertainties and challenges. Both adults and children can feel helpless and have a difficult time coping with the added challenges and unpredictability in our day to day lives. The characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorder (i.e., resistance to change, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviours) can make adapting to this pandemic especially difficult for children. Routines may be greatly affected making it difficult for your child to understand why they can't see some people, why some activities are not happening, or why they can't go to some of their favourite places. While everyone is dealing with this situation in their own way, do your best to model good self-regulation to help your child learn how to respond to these changes and the uncertainty. You can model that it is OK to feel upset, how to respond calmly to unexpected changes, how to take good care of yourself, etc.

Tip to get started with this strategy

Just as they say in airplanes, put your own oxygen mask on first. Start by taking good care of yourself. Eat regularly, sleep, move your body, keep in touch with family and friends, and ask for help when you need it. In addition, let your child see and learn from your experiences. If you're feeling upset, it is OK to say, "I am feeling really frustrated right now and I need to take a few deep breaths." For more information and self-care tips during COVID-19, consult the online resource "Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19" created by the Government of New Brunswick.

Final Thoughts

You don't have to use all of these strategies, nor do you have to use multiple strategies at the same time. You know your child and home environment the best; pick one strategy that you feel would help meet your family's and child's needs. Try it out for a few days and adjust it based on the results. Be kind to yourself as you try some new strategies since trying new things can be difficult.

Don't know where to start? If you are working with a team, reach out to them to communicate and collaborate. They can help you get started and support you along the way.

If your child is engaging in challenging behaviours that pose a risk to their safety or the safety of others, please reach out to professionals in your area for support on addressing these behaviours.



References

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