

Promoting Positive Behavior among Middle School Age Youth

There are basically four parts to promoting positive behavior in any environment, school, after school and home. The four parts are:

1. Clear and Simple Rules
2. Positive Reinforcement
3. Limits & Consequences
4. Enforcement

Establishing Clear and Simple Rules:

- Set 3-5 rules
- Simple and straightforward
- Observable & measurable
- Positively stated
- Focus on important behaviors
- Don't make rules you aren't prepared to consistently reinforce!

Examples:

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| 1. A compliance rule | Show Respect to others |
| 2. A preparation rule and on-time rule | Be on time and ready to participate |
| 3. A transition rule | Please walk when inside the building |
| 4. A classroom behavior rule | Clean up after activities & snack |
| 5. A talking rule | Use Indoor Voice |

- Practice and teach the rules
- Use specific examples for each activity/program

Positive Reinforcement:

To establish a positive environment you want to help youth learn which behaviors you are looking for by giving positive messages to youth that display those behaviors. Try to provide as much encouraging messages and positive reinforcement in the day.

- **Encouraging Better Choices** – Use the misbehavior as an opportunity to talk about other more positive choices that the youth has.
- **Encouraging Acceptable Actions** - Next time youth make and act on the positive choice give them positive reinforcement.
- **Encouraging Cooperation**
- **Encouraging Independence** – let them solve their problems in a positive way
- **Encouraging Improvement** – focus on the improved behavior and give positive feedback
- **Involving Parents in the Encouragement Process** – Let the parents know if they child has succeeded in a specific behavior, etc.

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Setting Limits & Creating Consequences

Limits are the stop sign for youth to stop misbehaving and comply by the rules. There are two kinds of limits: Soft Limits and Firm Limits.

Soft Limits:

1. Wished, Hopes and Shoulds
2. Repeating and Reminding
3. Speeches, Lectures, and Sermons
4. Warnings and Second Chances
5. Cooperate, OK?
6. Statements of Fact
7. Ignoring the Misbehavior
8. Reasoning and Explaining
9. Bargaining and Negotiating
10. Arguing and Debating
11. Pleading and Cajoling
12. Bribes and Special Rewards
13. Unclear Directions
14. Ineffective Role Modeling
15. Inconsistency between staff

Examples of Ineffective Verbal Messages (Soft Limits)

- “Would you cooperate just once in a while?”
- “Come on, get your act together!”
- “Would you do me a favor and pay attention?”

Firm Limits:

1. Keep the focus on your message on behavior:
2. Be direct and specific
3. Use your normal voice
4. Specify your consequences if necessary
5. Support your words with effective action

Examples of Effective Verbal Messages (Firm Limits)

- “Stop pushing now.”
- “It’s not OK to interrupt.”
- “I expect you back in five minutes.”
- “If you wipe the glue stick on others, I’ll have to take it away.”
- “You can play by the rules or find another game to play.”
- “You won’t be ready to leave until your desk is clean.”

- “Can’t you see I’m trying to teach a lesson?”
- “Could you yell a little softer?”
- “You better shape up.”
- “I don’t believe it. You actually did what I asked.”
- “Would you like it if I interrupted you?”
- “Stop acting like a jerk!”
- “Is it I asking too much to have a little cooperation?”
- “I’ve had enough from you!”

Examples of Ineffective Action Messages (Soft Limits)

- Allowing students to walk away from a mess.
- Cleaning up students’ messes for them.
- Overlooking misbehavior when you’re in a good mood.
- Overlooking misbehavior to avoid embarrassment.
- Giving in to persistent nagging.
- Giving in to a tantrum.

Examples of Effective Action Messages (Firm Limits)

- Time-out consequence for persistent disruption.
- Removing an object from a youth who does not put it away when asked.
- Revoking a play privilege temporarily for failing to play by the rules.
- Separating a youth from others for misbehaving in the gym.
- Temporary loss of a privilege for abusing that privilege.
- Holding youth accountable for cleaning up their messes.

Consequences:

What makes consequences effective?

- Immediacy – needs to be applied as soon as possible after the misbehavior
- Consistency – need to apply the same consequences to the same behaviors every time that behavior happens.
- Relatedness:
 - Natural – the natural result of an action (a group of youth do not come for snack rather play in the gym, they don't get any snack once snack is over)
 - Logical – Youth breaks a pool stick, youth pays to replace the stick.
- Duration: Set a specific duration not go to time out and I'll call you back when I feel you are ready
- Respect: Approach the child with respect and non-judgmental tone
- Clean Slate: After the consequence has been served, do not keep a tally of all the misbehavior or remind the child about what s/he did.

How to give consequences:

1. Use your normal voice
2. Think in simple terms
3. Before rules are violated, set up logical consequences with limited choice
4. After rules have been violated, apply logical consequences directly
5. Use timers for dawdling and procrastinating
6. Use logical consequences as often as you need them

Using Time-Outs:

Time-outs are generally brief (three to twenty minutes) and can be used repeatedly.

1. Select an appropriate time-out area
2. Use a two-stage procedure for persistent disruption.
3. Introduce time-out to your students before using it.
4. Use a timer – Stage one timeout about ten to fifteen minutes; Stage two timeouts should be twice as long as stage one.
5. For limit testing, set up time-out with limited choices.
6. When rules have been violated, apply time-out directly
7. After the time-out, provide a clean slate
8. Hold children accountable for time missed from activity
9. Use time-out as often as you need it

Enforcement: Don't Get Caught in the Dance

This is probably the toughest part and the part that most of us have the hardest time with.

Different Enforcement Techniques:

- The **permissive** approach: negotiating, not being clear, pleading, warning
- The **punitive** approach: Angry, frustrated, yelling, demeaning
- The **democratic** approach: calm, quick, and effective

Stopping the Dance before it starts:

The Check-In Procedure:

A clear message is given to the youth but s/he does not respond as expected. Did s/he hear us? When in doubt, check in with the youth by saying one of the following:

- “What did I ask you to do?”
- “Did you understand what I said?”
- “Were my directions clear?”
- “Tell me in your words what you heard me say?”

The Cut-Off Technique:

When youth try to engage you in arguments, debates, bargaining, or other forms of verbal sparring, say one of the following:

- “We’re done talking about it. If you bring it up again, then . . .” (Follow through with your action step.)
- “Discussion time is over. You can do what you were asked, or you can (Limited Choice). What would you like to do?”

The Cooldown:

The cooldown is a great way to regain self-control and stop getting into an angry dance. When there is a danger of anger or upset, separate yourself from the youth by saying one of the following:

- **When both sides are upset** “I think we both need a little time to cool down. Have a seat at the back table (or designated time out space). We’ll talk about it in (number of minutes or convenient time to talk).
- **When the youth is upset** “You look angry to me. You can either cool down at (designated time out space) or in (a different but safe space). What would you like to do?”
- **When the adult is upset** “I’m feeling angry, and need some time to cool down. You can keep working while I get myself under control or take a five minute break.”

References:

MacKenzie, Robert J. (1996) *Setting Limits in the Classroom*. Prima Publishing, Rocklin, CA