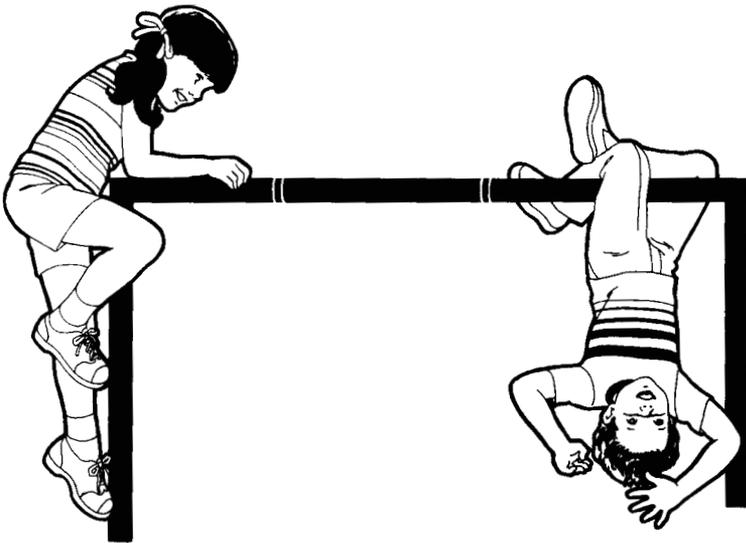




# Guiding Children's Behaviour

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BCHealthPlanning

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For more information on this or other child care issues,  
please contact your local health authority.

There is also a video version of this booklet which is available  
at all regional health offices, public libraries,  
and through child care referral and resource contacts  
(Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services).

This booklet may also be viewed on the  
Ministry of Health Planning website at  
[www.healthplanning.gov.bc.ca/ccf/child](http://www.healthplanning.gov.bc.ca/ccf/child)

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# Introduction

The topic of guiding children's behaviour is of interest to a variety of individuals who care for children. Whether the setting is in a Family Child Care home, a Preschool, a Group Day Care centre or an Out of School Care environment, an understanding of the basic principles and practices related to guiding children's behaviour serve as a foundation for interacting successfully with children.

The booklet promotes strategies and techniques that reinforce requirements in the *Community Care Facility Act* and **Child Care Licensing Regulation**. As described in the Child Care Licensing Regulation, licensed settings are required to have a written discipline policy.

This booklet provides an overview of the attitudes, knowledge and skills helpful to parents, caregivers, and professionals in their day-to-day relationships with children. It introduces two different strategies – prevention and intervention. It also offers a practical framework with concrete suggestions and examples.

Positive strategies that encourage self-guidance are based on the value and belief that children can learn impulse control to help them develop self-discipline, responsibility, positive capabilities and attitudes. Guiding children's behaviour is an ongoing process; it is a long-term goal that parents, caregivers and professionals have for children.

# Guiding Children's Behaviour

## Discipline - a Definition

What do we mean when we say “discipline” or “guiding children’s behaviour”? Discipline is something adults do with and for children, rather than to children to stop them from behaving in undesirable ways. Guiding children’s behaviour is intended to help children become self-disciplined as they learn appropriate and acceptable behaviour patterns. These methods of guiding behaviour are continuous. Discipline or guiding children’s behaviour is done while appropriate behaviour is occurring, as well as before, during, and after socially unacceptable behaviour is displayed.

While there are a wide variety of theories and approaches related to guiding children’s behaviour, the goal remains constant – to assist children in developing respect, self-control, self-confidence and sensitivity in their interactions with others.

“Self-discipline requires an understanding of oneself and an awareness of the ways in which one can cope with difficulties, frustrations, and disappointments. Self-discipline affords a person the inclination to concentrate on a task as long as is necessary to learn, perfect, or complete it.” *A. Gedrose*

## Purpose

The purpose of this booklet is to offer recommended practices for guidance, which are based on developmentally appropriate child development. Self-discipline methods are not humiliating to children, or to adults. Self-discipline is based on mutual respect and cooperation. These guidelines will assist parents and those working with all ages of children and will serve as a reminder for those with training and experience.

## Issues and Considerations

Children’s behaviour is influenced by their overall development, their environment, and the adults who care for them. Adults should first consider guidance principles based on the following factors.

# A: Child Development

## 1. Each Child is a Unique Individual

By nature, children differ in terms of their activity level, distractability, and sensitivity. Parents and caregivers who accept and understand these differences in children's styles will be in a better position to offer effective and appropriate guidance for them.

## 2. Children's Behaviour Reflects Their Level of Development

When adults recognize that growth entails both experimenting and making mistakes, and that difficulties are a normal, expected part of children's development, they tend to be more accepting and patient with socially unacceptable behaviour. It is important to have reasonable expectations which are consistent with each child's developmental abilities. When adults have an understanding of appropriate developmental issues for children, they are more effective in dealing with them. Caregivers who take the time to offer developmentally appropriate verbal explanations and guidance help children gain confidence, competence, and social problem-solving skills.



## 3. Children's Experience in Their Family and Culture Influences Their Behaviour Patterns

Expectations for behaviour vary greatly from family to family, and from culture to culture. Some may place a higher value on compliance, dependence, and respect for elders, while others may give priority to risk-taking, assertiveness, and independence. Knowledge about a child's background and respect for different value systems will help caregivers respond sensitively to varying child-rearing approaches.

In summary, adults who appreciate these principles of child development will develop attitudes and practices which are based on realistic expectations of children's needs and abilities.

# B: Environment

The environment refers to all that surrounds a child. This includes both physical and social elements.

## 1. Things

When toys and materials are in good supply, familiar and developmentally-appropriate, children are encouraged to focus and become involved in productive learning experiences. Caregivers who are knowledgeable about the ways in which environments influence behaviour can plan their settings accordingly. With groups of infants and toddlers, providing duplicates of favorite toys is essential.



## 2. Space

The way in which space is used can either encourage or discourage desired behaviour. Where space is sufficient, children can play and work in a relaxed setting. It is important that sufficient space is available for the program of activities. Where areas are specifically designated for adults or children, and/or for individuals or groups, conflict is minimized. In short, space which is aesthetically pleasing, planned, and organized contributes to an environment which promotes good mental health and diminishes the potential for problems.

## 3. People — (Adults and Children)

Adults who are committed to nurturing and guiding young children create an atmosphere which fosters trust, security, and comfort.

An adult's verbal and physical communications skills are critical in modelling the behaviour they wish children to learn. When children are in an environment that encourages caring and cooperative relationships, they learn to relate with each other in positive ways.

## **4. Time / Program Schedule**

Schedules, routines, and transitions serve as a framework from which children gain trust, security, and order. While these can be flexible to some degree, they must provide children with clear guidelines about what is expected.

Meeting children's needs throughout the day requires that time be appropriately balanced between active and restful periods, individual and group activities, and child initiated/adult initiated content.

## **C. Guidance Strategies: Prevention**

The following strategies are prevention oriented. They “set the stage” for a positive atmosphere and maximize opportunities for desirable behaviour.

### **1. Establish Clear, Consistent, & Simple Limits**

Limits are statements of what behaviour is appropriate. They ensure children know what is expected. Limits should be clearly related to the safety and protection of self, others, and the environment. They should be few in number, consistently enforced, and within the child's ability to understand. For example:

“Inside we walk.”

“Chairs are for sitting on.”

“Hands must be washed before we eat.”

## 2. Offer Straightforward Explanations for Limits

When children understand the reasons or rationale for limits, they are more likely to comply and abide by them.

Furthermore, teaching children the “why” of a limit helps them internalize and learn the rules of social living. For example:

“The sand stays down low so that it doesn’t get into people’s eyes.”

“When you put the toys back on the shelf, people can find them easily when they want them.”

## 3. State Limits in a Positive Way, Rather Than in a Negative Way

Phrasing limits in a positive way focuses on what to do, rather than what not to do. When parents and caregivers offer these positive statements, they reinforce for children what is appropriate, serve as desirable models of communication for children to imitate, and decrease the likelihood for children to respond with defensiveness or resistance. For example:

“It’s time to put the blocks away.”

*Rather than:* “Don’t leave the blocks on the floor.”

“Turn the pages gently.”

*Rather than:* “Don’t be rough with that book.”

## 4. Focus on the Behaviour, Rather Than on the Child

Messages which focus on “You always . . .” or “You never . . .” may be perceived by a child as attacking and critical. They tend to produce feelings of guilt and shame and can ultimately result in lowering a child’s self-esteem. When caregivers focus on a child’s behaviour, rather than on a child’s character, they preserve a child’s integrity and offer positive guidance for learning. For example:

“When you grab the truck, it makes Sam angry.”

*Rather than:* “You should be ashamed of yourself for grabbing the truck.”

“It’s not safe to climb on tables.”

*Rather than:* “You naughty boy.”

## 5. State What is Expected, Rather Than Pose Questions

In matters of routines, limits, and expected behaviours, it is important to state, rather than to ask. Posing questions implies that the child has a choice. While there are many opportunities for children to make choices, offer these options only when they are appropriate. When there is not a choice, make a clear statement of what is expected. For example:

“It’s time to tidy up now.”

*Rather than:* “Do you want to tidy up?”

“Your mommy is here. It’s time to go home.”

*Rather than:* “Do you want to go home now?”

## 6. Provide Choices

Providing choices is also a valid prevention strategy for young children which often avoids power struggles. For example:

“Do you want to put your pants on first, or your shirt?”

*Rather than:* “Get dressed now.”

## 7. Allow Time for Children to Respond to Expectations

Children react more favourably when they are offered cues and warnings. This helps them to anticipate or prepare for change. Instead of demanding immediate results, parents and caregivers should be prepared to give children time to respond. For example:

“In five minutes, it will be time to clean up.”

*Rather than:* “Get that cleaned up now.”

“When everyone is sitting quietly, then I will begin the story.”

*Rather than:* “If you don’t sit down there won’t be a story.”



## 8. Reinforce Appropriate Behaviour, With Both Words and Gestures

When children are doing well, it is important to acknowledge this through words or gestures. Positive reinforcement helps children build self-confidence and encourages them to repeat desired behaviours. In using this strategy, adults should again take care to focus on the specific behaviour, rather than on the child. For example:

“Thank you for taking turns with Kathy. That’s called being kind.”  
*Rather than:* “You good girl.”

“When you tidy up, it makes our room safe.”  
*Rather than:* “You’re my best helper.”

“You look really proud of your work.”  
*Rather than:* “I’m so proud of you.”

## 9. Ignore Minor Incidents

Adults who work with young children need to develop tolerance for a certain amount of noise, clutter, and attention-seeking behaviour. As long as children’s activities are not infringing on the rights of others, it is often best to “take a breath,” rather than to speak.



## 10. Encourage Children to Use You as a Resource

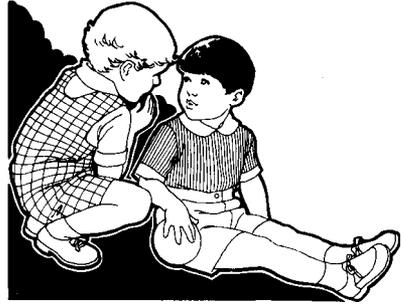
Children feel a greater sense of comfort and trust when they know that the caregiver or parent is there to protect, guide, and help them. When children learn that the adult is willing to listen and respond in a fair and supportive manner, their security and control increases. For example:

“If you’re not sure what to do, ask, and I’ll help you.”  
*Rather than:* “That’s hard for you, so I’ll do it.”

“I’ll stand beside you while you ask Carlos if you can join in.”  
*Rather than:* “Don’t be silly, talk to Carlos yourself.”

## 11. Be Alert

When adults observe children in their activities, they are in a better position to anticipate potential difficulties and step in to prevent problems.



## 12. Proximity

Often it is necessary to stay close by when younger children are still learning to play together.

# D. Guidance Strategies: Intervention

While the preceding strategies will help to create a positive climate and minimize behaviour problems, there will inevitably be occurrences of inappropriate behaviour. At these times, adults will need to intervene. *The following intervention strategies, or a combination of these strategies, will help ensure that guidance is supportive, rather than punitive.*

### 1. Gain a Child's Attention in a Respectful Way

Apart from situations where physical danger is imminent, adults should approach children individually, state their name, get down to the child's eye level, and use a calm, controlled voice.

### 2. Use Proximity and Touch

In situations where children may be losing self-control, the closeness of an adult can often help calm them. Simply moving close to a child, moving between two children or putting an arm around a child can serve as effective guidance and intervention. This may be a helpful strategy when dealing with biting, hitting, pinching, kicking, or thrashing.

### **3. Remind**

To clarify and reinforce limits, simple reminders are helpful to young children. In general, toddlers and preschoolers have a short attention span and can become easily distracted when engaged in activities. Caregivers must be prepared to remind often. For example:

“The bikes stay on the bike paths.”

“Sand stays down.”

### **4. Acknowledge Feelings Before Setting Limits**

In order that children perceive adult guidance as supportive, it is important for them to know that their feelings are recognized and understood. When limits are preceded by an acknowledgement of feelings, children will be less likely to respond in a negative way. For example:

“You look really angry. I cannot let you hurt Scott.”

“It’s hard to wait for your turn. The rule is that we line up for the slide.”

With toddlers, often just acknowledging the feeling is enough. Their short attention span needs to be taken into account.

### **5. Redirect or Divert When Appropriate**

This can be an effective strategy with children whose attention span and verbal abilities are limited. With upset toddlers or very young preschoolers, offering a substitute toy or engaging them in some other activity may quickly resolve problems or conflicts. As children mature, however, this strategy is less desirable, since it “sidesteps” children’s involvement in problem solving and does not help them learn alternate approaches to situations.

Redirecting or diverting involves changing the circumstances that are causing unwanted behaviour. When adults redirect children’s activity, they assume responsibility for solving a problem which children have been unable to resolve through other guidance strategies. As much as possible, children should be redirected towards activities that are in line with their needs. For example:

“I can see you really need to be outside. Let’s get our coats.”

## 6. Model Problem-Solving Skills

When children face discouraging or frustrating situations, it is natural for them to lose control. As parents and caregivers anticipate this, they can offer verbal and/or physical assistance which models problem solving. The following steps could be used in such situations:

- (a) A starting point in providing coping skills is to acknowledge the problem. For example:

“I can see there is a problem. Tim has the bike, and you want it.”

“It’s frustrating when the blocks won’t balance.”

- (b) Following a statement of the problem, it may be appropriate to pose helpful questions. For example:

“Have you asked Tim to give you the bike when he’s finished?”

“What would happen if you put the big block on the bottom?”

- (c) If further guidance is necessary, state a solution or physically demonstrate. For example:

“Tell Tim that you would like to use the bike when his turn is over.”

“Put the biggest block on the bottom, like this.”

- (d) When a situation has been resolved, it is helpful to summarize for older children. For example:

“Next time, you can try to remember how we solved the problem.”

“You thought you couldn’t do it, but now you’ve learned that you can.”

The intent of modelling a problem-solving approach is to provide resources for overcoming obstacles to success. Whether the problem relates to working with materials or interacting with others, following the steps of problem solving helps children learn the process involved. As children become more familiar and experienced with this process, they can be encouraged to generate suggestions or alternatives of their own.

## 7. Offer Appropriate Choices

When clarifying expectations or reinforcing limits, caregivers can offer a simple choice. The choice should be posed in a non-threatening and non-punitive way. For example:

“You can sit quietly at the circle, or you can choose a quiet activity like a puzzle. You decide.”

“Do you want to wait there for your turn, or do you want to find something else to do?”

## 8. Use Natural and Logical Consequences

A statement of *natural* consequences simply clarifies the inevitable or unavoidable outcome of a behaviour. For example:

“When you forget to put your picture on the shelf, it’s difficult to find it when it’s time to go home.”

A statement of *logical* consequence clarifies an adult-arranged outcome of a behaviour. For example:

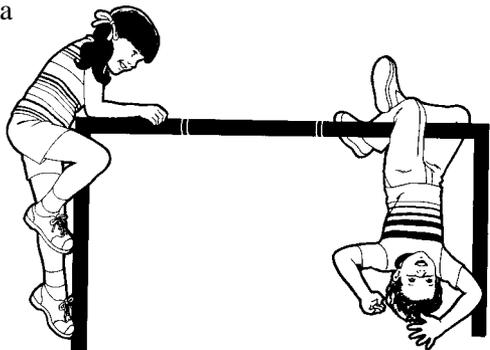
“Yes, I can see that the paint spilled. Here is a sponge for wiping it up.”

## 9. Limit the Use of Equipment

Redirecting often goes hand in hand with removing a piece of equipment from a child’s play options. This strategy should be used sparingly and only when other strategies have proven unsuccessful. For example:

“Since you are having a hard time playing gently on the piano, I’m going to close it now.”

“The climbing frame is ‘off limits’ now because the climbers are using it in an unsafe way.”



## 10. Provide Opportunities for Children to Make Amends

Rather than demand a superficial apology, adults should offer genuine opportunities for children to restore relationships after an incident of hurt or harm. While children may not be immediately ready to “take” these opportunities, they should be suggested nonetheless. Ultimately, the goal of this strategy is to help children learn that making amends requires time and goodwill, rather than revenge. For example:

“Sharon doesn’t feel ready to play with you yet, because she’s still upset. Let’s give her a little time.”

“Maybe you could help by getting Michael a kleenex while I get a band-aid. No? Okay, maybe you just feel like being alone for a while.”

## E. Challenging Behaviours: Intervention

### 1. Redirection

This can be an effective strategy for all ages of children. With upset toddlers or preschoolers, offering a substitute toy or engaging them in some other activity may quickly resolve problems or conflicts. As children mature, this strategy enables them to recognize their own emotions and behaviours and to redirect themselves away from an over stimulating situation, activity or location before inappropriate behaviours occur or escalate. When children are guided to develop impulse control and redirect themselves to an area that helps them to “feel better”; they are able to interact cooperatively again in shared settings. Self directed environments should be anywhere that a child can begin to “feel good” again.

## 2. Holding

No matter what age of children you work with, holding should only be used for safety reasons and a behaviour plan needs to be in place. Where a child's loss of control and the ability to reason causes him or her to become a safety hazard to him/herself or others, a caregiver may assist the child in re-establishing control through this technique as a last resort. The intent of this strategy is to soothe the child and to keep them and others safe until self-control is regained. A calm and controlled attitude of the adult is critical in ensuring that this strategy is supportive, not punitive.

## 3. Time Away

Time away can show children that being redirected from an over stimulating environment to a more calming area allows them to manage their own behaviours before inappropriate behaviours occur or escalate. The intent of time away is to provide children with opportunities to develop self direction and to become aware of when they are becoming anxious or agitated. Unpredictable behaviours occur when children feel powerless and out of control. When children have determined where they would like to spend time to “feel better” and to regain control of their emotional and physical state, invite them to determine when they are ready to participate in activities with the group again – time in. Children learn self control when they feel encouraged, when they feel they belong and feel valued, and when they feel they have power in their lives. Some examples of environments where children can feel better are:

- (a) A pillow corner with books, stuffies and music head sets
- (b) A container filled with foam chips and surrounded with books and gentle sounds of nature (i.e. head sets of whale sounds, wind storms, etc.)
- (c) A loft above a play centre with pillows, blankets, books and music.



# Summary

In most instances of guidance and discipline, adults are encouraged to *combine approaches* or use *a variety of strategies* as they respond to children's behaviour. For example, if a child seems reluctant to eat, the adult might say:

“I know you're not very hungry, but I want you to try a little bit.”  
*(Acknowledge feelings before setting limits.)*

If the child continues to resist, the adult might say:

“You can eat half your sandwich or half your yogurt. You decide.”  
*(Offer appropriate choices.)*

If the child refuses to eat at this point, the adult might say:

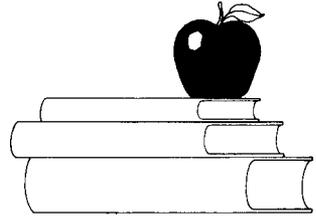
“I can see you're not interested in your lunch. Maybe you'll feel hungry for it at snack time. You can pack it up now and start to get ready for a nap.”  
*(Use logical consequences and redirect.)*

It is important to remember that no one strategy will be effective in every situation, or with every child. At different levels of development, strategies must vary. However, the more options for guidance and discipline that caregivers have to choose from, the more successful they will be in meeting the challenge of living and working with young children.



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The titles listed below are readily available paperback books which provide concrete resources in the area of guiding children's behaviour.



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Additional resources, including books and videos, are available at the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre library in Vancouver: (604) 709-5661 or toll free 1-877-262-0022. They will mail province-wide.

For more information on this or other child care issues, please contact your local health authority.

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