

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

MAY 2025 EDITION



BRAYDEN, AGE 16

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EVA
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SUGGESTED READING

There are thousands of adoption resources available for families, professionals, and people who were adopted. The following books have been read and recommended by our staff.

The names after the title of the books are either the authors or editors.

Preparation for Adoption / Seeking to Adopt

Parents Wanted; Harrar, George

Parenting Children Who Were Adopted

Attaching In Adoption; Gray, Deborah D.

Transracial Adoption

The Bean Trees; Kingsolver, Barbara

Special Needs Adoption

The Explosive Child; Greene, Ross W.

Resources for Professionals

Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma; Levine PhD; Peter A.; Perry, Bruce D, et al.

Search and Reunion

Hidden Heritage: The Story of Paul LaRoche; Marshak, Barbara

Children's / Teens' Books

A Mother for Choco; Keiko Kasza

Memoirs / Stories

A Love Like No Other; Kruger, Pamela; Smolowe, Jill

International Adoption

There is No Me Without You; Greene, Melissa Fay

The Utah Adoption Connection has curated an excellent list of recommended books to support individuals and families at every stage of the adoption journey. Visit <https://www.utahadopt.org/building-your-family/suggested-reading> to learn more.



ON THE COVER: BRAYDEN

Brayden is a sweet, fun, and engaging eighth grader with a big imagination and a love for creativity. One of his favorite hobbies is drawing—especially with bright, bold colors that reflect his vibrant personality. When he's not sketching, you might find him playing games or diving into his Magic: The Gathering cards. His favorite meal? Alfredo with broccoli—especially if it's followed by a tasty dessert!

Brayden also has a soft spot for superheroes, and if he could choose any superpower, he'd go with mind control. He enjoys playing video games, folding origami, and getting lost in the world of Anime.

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Treatments and Strategies for Weak Executive Functions

by Janice Rodden for
ADDitudeMag.com
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Parents, add these strategies to your repertoire: Therapies, reward systems, and classroom accommodations built to strengthen executive functioning skills in children and adults who struggle to plan, coordinate, and execute long-term projects.

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How to Treat Executive Dysfunction

Experts recommend a range of strategies to help strengthen the areas of weakness that executive function disorder (EFD) creates. The first method uses occupational or speech therapists, psychologists, or reading tutors to learn how to work around problem areas. Cognitive behavioral therapy, used in combination with medication to treat any coexisting conditions like **ADHD**, is very effective at treating executive dysfunction including problems with inhibition, emotion regulation, time management, and planning in adults. CBT is less effective with children.

For children, behavior modification programs like token systems and daily report cards work better. Parents can request special accommodations at school via a **504 Plan or individualized education program (IEP)**. If your child does not qualify for these, a teacher may try informal accommodations, like seating a child near the front of the room. Additional accommodations like splitting assignments into small pieces, and giving frequent breaks can help supplement problem areas, and give the executive system a chance to recharge.

Add rewards and privileges at home if the child does well at school. Focus first on the positives before the negatives. Encourage the things the child is doing well with external reinforcement and then bring in mild forms of discipline if necessary, like taking away points or privileges. Be more structured and systematic by implementing checklists, planners, and timers to help kids with tasks.

For people with EFD, it's important not to just focus on teaching new information, but also on teaching the skills they need to better use the knowledge they have. For example, put time into helping redesign the environment to help people with EFD remember what they need to be doing.

Adults can compensate for working memory deficits by making information external — using cards, signs, symbols, sticky notes, lists, journals, and apps. Make time external by using clocks, timers, computers, counters, and other devices that track time intervals. Use external motivation, like points systems, being accountable to others at work and school, daily school report cards — anything that reinforces accomplishing goals.

Give yourself a problem-solving manual. Take the problem, and break it into pieces that are easy to tackle. Allow the self-regulatory system to pause and refill by giving rewards and positive emotions during tasks that are stressful to the executive functions system. For example, engage in positive self statements, encourage yourself to try harder and visualize accomplishing the goal. Take 3- to 10-minute breaks periodically to relax or meditate. Use physical exercise to help cope with symptoms. Sip a drink with sugar to keep blood glucose up and your brain running smoothly.

Alternative Treatments for Executive Function Disorder

Children with **executive function disorder** have unique needs in the classroom. They might need extra help to understand assignments, get started, and stay focused. Accommodations along with games and technology can help compensate for an area of weakness.

For the child who has always loses homework or forgets assignments:

- Post tasks on the board
- Read assignments out loud
- Have kids repeat them
- Appoint a row captain to check that everyone has written down the assignment
- Teach note-taking skills
- Use color and put different tasks on different color cards
- For the child who loses focus and is easily frustrated:
- Have kids run in place or be active for a minute
- Have two work stations so that kids can get up and move between assignments
- Let kids use fidget toys
- Give kid graphic organizers

The key to choosing successful accommodation is identifying the two or three most important deficits and picking accommodations that address them. To help children at home, provide structure with a special place to work on assignments that is equipped with everything they need to get started. Set a start time for beginning work after school, sit with them while they start assignments, and then check homework when it's finished.

Break homework into segments. Give kids a snack, or let them run around before starting homework. Let kids listen to music while they work to stimulate focus. Have the phone number of someone in class to check the assignment or borrow a forgotten book. Try using assistive technology to supplement areas of weakness. If writing by hand is difficult, use a computer. If keeping track of time is a problem, try a timer. If staying organized is the issue, try iPhone apps to help.

Games can help to improve executive function skills. Games like Checkers, Monopoly, and Clue use planning, sustained attention, response inhibition, working memory and metacognition. Games like Zelda and SimCity help with problem solving and goal-directed persistence. Managing a fantasy sports teams also use executive skills like task initiation and time management while having fun. Support groups — both online and in person — can help parents and adults connect with people who are experiencing similar difficulties, and give ideas of treatment or accommodations that have helped.





Climbing Out of Chronic Stress

BY: JESSICA SINARSKI, LPCMH ([HTTPS://JESSICASINARSKI.COM/CHRONIC-STRESS](https://jessicasinarski.com/chronic-stress))

Stress is not bad.

Life involves stress, and working from a brain-based or trauma-sensitive lens does not mean removing all stressors. In fact, our stress response gives us the cortisol and adrenaline we need for navigating daily life. The little bit of oomph provided by those get-stuff-done chemicals is much-needed!

Living with chronic or toxic stress is a different story.

The human brain's natural response to high levels of stress is to flip into survival mode, the fight/flight/freeze patterns found in the downstairs brain. That might look like:

- Having a short temper
- Difficulty concentrating
- Low mood
- Foggy thinking
- Irritability
- Apathy
- Feeling numb
- Isolating from others
- Low motivation
- Feeling on edge or anxious

If any of that sounds familiar, this article is for you.

Stressor vs. Stress


Let's start by clarifying two important terms. According to Burnout authors Emily and Amelia Nagoski...

A **stressor** can be “anything you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, or imagine could do you harm,” such as work to get done, expectations of others, fear of the future, family issues, etc.

Stress, on the other hand, is “the neurological and physiological shift that happens in your body when you encounter one of these threats.” It's that cascade of hormones and physical changes that get you ready to fight, run, or survive the danger any which way you can.

Unfortunately, stress doesn't go away just because a stressor is gone. When we feel stressed, our bodies and brains need a way to release the chemical and electrical signals that are flying around saying, “DANGER, DANGER! ACTIVATE!”

Think of it this way: If you are running late to get out the door in the morning, your heart rate and breath speed up, tension builds, and your porcupine quills might come out when your son still doesn't have his shoes on. Once he is on the bus and you are on your way to work, the stressor of getting out the door is over, but your body and brain are still pumping all those activating signals back and forth.

“Just because you've
dealt with the **stressor** 



**Doesn't mean you've
dealt with the *stress*.”**

-Nagoski & Nagoski

Understanding the (simple) Stress Response Cycle

Reading the scenario above, I am guessing you can come up with a few easy ways to let the stress from the morning go before you head into work, such as:

- A few deep breaths
- Sing along to the music
- Text a friend who gets it
- Take a quick walk before you get on your first zoom call

These simple actions help your nervous system get the little bit of rest and recovery it needs to face the next stressor, a process known as “completing the stress cycle.” Here's how it works:

The Stress Response Cycle

@JessicaSinarski



But real life is not so simple.

Teachers face hundreds of little (and some very big) stressors all day long.

Social workers and therapists are called on to intervene in impossibly stressful situations.

Parents of kids with strong Downstairs Brain protectors (and the challenging behavior that comes with) can't just "remove the stressor."

It is easy to end up in a pattern that looks like this:

As stressors from family, work, or financial concerns pile up, chronic stress begins to take its toll.

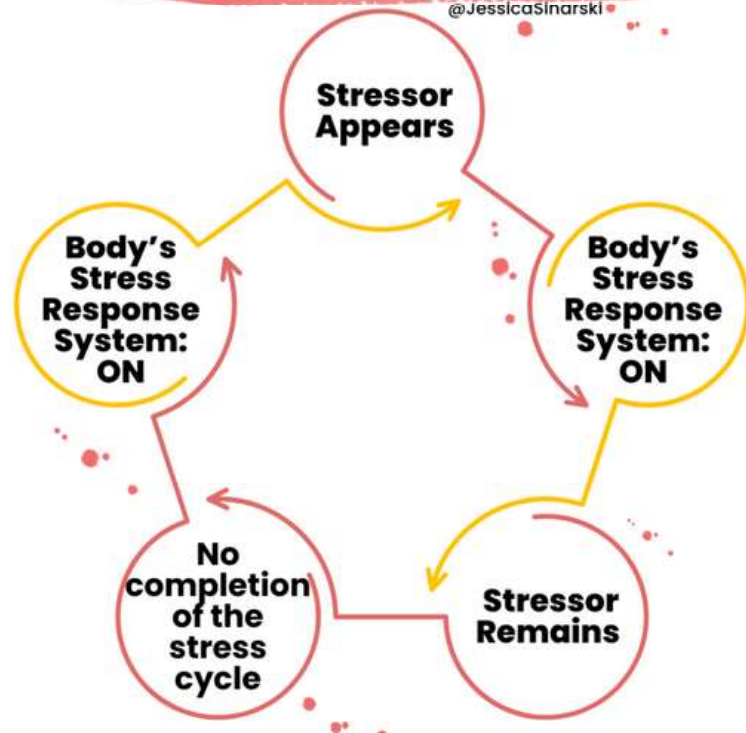
You might feel it in your body as headaches, fatigue, or an upset stomach. Digestion, breathing, and blood flow are all interrupted. Our bodies are responding like the stressed mammals that we are, and the Downstairs Brain tries to run the show.

We need to complete the stress cycle.

A growing body of research shows that there are effective strategies for letting go of some of the stress we carry, commonly called "completing the stress cycle."

The Chronic Stress Cycle

@JessicaSinarski



Navigating Chronic Stress: Complete the Body's Stress Cycle

@JessicaSinarski



This lets us rest and recover so that we can face the day ahead with our creative, problem-solving Upstairs Brain running the show.



7 Ways to Complete the Stress Cycle

Here are seven effective strategies for completing the stress cycle for you to choose from. What are you already doing? What jumps out at you that you might want to explore more? Read on for additional ideas for each category.



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Dance in the kitchen, chase your kids around the playground, or go for a walk or run or swim. Even stomping your feet and screaming or punching your pillow can help! It doesn't have to be intense physical activity - yoga, stretching, and other gentle practices all have important stress relieving benefits as well.

PHYSICAL CONNECTION

A long, strong hug (about 20 seconds, according to the research) or some snuggle time with a pet can trigger the release of the yummy bonding hormone oxytocin, which sends safety signals to the rest of your body.

LAUGHTER

Those big belly laughs, especially when we share the joy with a friend or loved one, release all kinds of happy chemicals. This is probably why sitcoms have been in constant rotation for me since I started working in foster care 20 years ago. Let yourself laugh out loud! Plus, laughter is contagious. So you might just help someone else complete the stress cycle too.

CREATIVITY

Do you like to knit, paint, bake, sing, write, doodle, or garden? Outcome doesn't matter as much as the process. Creative endeavors give our brains the chance to experience beauty and messiness and everything in between.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Social media doesn't count here. Get the full 3D experience and say hi to another human...at the grocery store, in the hall at work, or even a quick phone call with a friend. It's a powerful reminder to your upstairs brain that you are not alone with the weight of the world. Deeper social connection like an evening walk with your partner, support group, or gathering of close friends and family are ways to complete the stress cycle so rest and relaxation can kick in, at least for a moment.

BREATHING

Whether a more extensive meditation practice or quick reset, deep breathing is a powerful tool for completing the stress cycle. Anything that gets that exhale longer than the inhale should help the brain get the message: "Hey, we're ok. No Tiger powers needed right now." Here's a simple one I shared on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) that is great for kids. Another favorite that I often turn to at bedtime is 4-7-8 breathing:

- Breathe in as you count 1,2,3,4
- Hold for 7
- Let your breath out be long and slow as you count down 8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1

CRYING

When is the last time you had a good, ugly cry? My guess is that if you are experiencing chronic stress, there's some stuff you are grieving. Letting yourself watch a sad episode of your favorite show or listen to a song that brings on the feels might create space for the important physical and emotional relief of a hearty cry.

A Final Encouragement

Over the years, I have heard two common “survival brain” thoughts that hold us back from completing the stress cycle.

“I feel guilty.”

Yes, someone always has it worse than you. And...you’re not going to help anyone out by feeling extra stressed or burning out.

I’m not here to convince you to not feel guilty, but I would encourage you to think about what you would tell a close friend or loved one. Take in that kindness, compassion, and wisdom. Does it apply to you too?

“I don’t have time.”

Try making a 30-second commitment. Choose one option for completing the stress cycle and try it for 30 seconds every day this week. Or maybe you’re ready for 3 minutes. You don’t have to start with an hour!!

Here are some spots in your day that might make it easier to get a habit going:

- Before checking social media
- Before lunch
- First thing in the morning
- Right after the kids are in bed
- When you get in the car to head home

I’m glad we’re in this together!





The Ultimate Guide To Building A Calming Corner And Using Time-Ins At Home

By Ashely Patek

How do you say goodbye to time-outs and introduce time-ins? This is the ultimate guide on the do's and don'ts for building and using a Calming Corner.

Your four-year-old daughter drops to the floor in a puddle, arms and legs flailing. She wants the choo-choo train her baby brother is holding, despite the basket of toy trains that sit on the floor right next to her.

All too fast, your daughter's flailing arms kick a pillow off the couch and, *womp*, the pillow lands smack dab onto baby brother's head. You watch on helplessly from about five feet away as your son topples to his side and begins to wail.

Your daughter holds the prized train up high over her head, well out of reach from little hands, and continues to scream.

Both of your children are now crying, and your anger hits a boiling point.

So what do you do?

In the past, you've tried putting your daughter in time-out on the steps but, being the strong-willed child that she is, she ignores your directives and immediately gets up off the step, placing the two of you into a locked-horns power struggle. Forcing her raging body back onto the step and leaving her in isolation seems cruel and ineffective, after all, your goal is not to control your daughter, it's to teach her how to control herself.

If any of this rings true for you, then setting up a calming space in your home might be the game-changing solution you've been looking for.

What is a Time-In?

Time-ins help children learn how to manage their feelings in a safe space, practicing social and emotional skills when they are calm so they can effectively use them when they are not. Time-ins reinforce attachment and connection, reinforcing skills children will have and use for a lifetime including self-awareness, empathy, conflict resolution, and problem-solving.

Dr. Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and executive director of the Mindsight Institute, says, “Having kids reflect on and talk about their emotions, what we are calling a time-in, has been demonstrated in a wide range of studies to support the important development of emotional understanding. We encourage parents to comfort and soothe and connect with their children during times of distress, and to reflect afterward on their inner experience with reflective dialogue, rather than punitively isolating them in a moment of anger and without any opportunity for reflection and connection.” Generation Mindful’s [Time-In Toolkit](#) gives families everything they need in one place to ditch time-outs --- posters, cards, stickers, social-emotional learning activities, videos, step-by-step instructions, curriculum, and a free online community to hold your hand through it all.

From Time-Outs To Time-Ins

When children feel powerful, safe, and connected, they learn much more easily than when they are feeling fear or shame. If you have used time-outs in the past, start your time-in journey by saying GOODBYE to time-outs with your children in a memorable, concrete, and playful way.

Marking your transition encourages children to trust in your shift away from punishment and to take ownership of time-ins, increasing their intrinsic motivation to embrace the new approach. The more silly and memorable the goodbye ritual is, the better!

Ways To Say Good-Bye To Time-Outs

- Write "time-outs" on a piece of toilet paper and flush it down the toilet.
- Remove the time-out chair from your space (if you had one) and put it out on your front curb to be donated as you march, sing, and/or dance to an upbeat song.
- Have your children draw a picture of how they felt when they were put in time-outs. Have them draw a picture of how they imagine they'll feel taking a time-in with you instead. Ask them to draw a big heart around the one they like more.
- Engage your child by asking them directly, “How would you like to say goodbye to time-outs?”



There are a number of differences between time-outs and the time-ins:

Time-Outs

- You are in trouble for your thoughts, emotions, words, actions
- You are being punished for being bad
- Children focus on how unfair it is that they are in a time-out more than their behavior
- Fuels a child's anger and may lead to sneaking and lying
- Children feel angry or hurt by the person who puts them in a time-out

Time-Ins

- You are having trouble with your thoughts, emotions, words, actions
- You are having a learning moment where you can practice new skills
- Children reflect on what happened, and how they are feeling.
- Builds a child's brain and leads to learning
- Children feel closer to themselves and others after a time-in

Talk with your children about the many differences that exist between time-outs and time-ins in an age-appropriate way they can understand. You might begin this conversation by saying something like, "Instead of getting punished or having to sit on the step when we are having trouble controlling our bodies, we can go to our Calming Corner for a time-in and practice calming down together. And if we notice we are mad or sad or scared, we can take a time-in then, too."

If your children are able to absorb more information, add, "That way, if we say or do something we wish we would not have said or done, we can learn from it, correct it, and do things differently next time."

Time-Ins Make It Safe To Fail

A time-in is not a dressed-up version of a time-out, and you will want to be clear about this before you transition into using time-ins. Teach your children that everybody makes mistakes. It's important to introduce this concept before setting up the Calming Corner so that they don't mentally and emotionally write off time-ins as another form of punishment in the face of misbehavior.

To open this conversation with your children ages three and up, it can be helpful to open with a question like, “Do you think it’s okay to make mistakes?”

Listen to your child's response and see if you can better understand your child’s thoughts and feelings when it comes to making mistakes. Write down the things you hear without judgment. Repeat your child’s responses back to them, minus any commentary, so that they feel heard.

Here are a few ideas to make mistakes (aka learning moments) safe in your home:

- Share the idea that even though a learning moment might sometimes feel bad, a learning moment does not mean that we are bad.
- Talk about mistakes you have made in your life, and lessons you have learned. If age-appropriate, invite your child to do the same, or for younger kids, offer help with the process.
- If you actively see your child make a mistake, get underneath your own triggers to respond to what is happening, rather than react. When children feel safe to make mistakes, they are more likely to learn from them.
- Model grace to yourself when you make a mistake. Our kids are always watching, and the way we speak to ourselves will become the foundation for their own self-talk.

For many children, making mistakes does not feel safe, but feelings can evolve over time. Affirm your child's sense of self and emphasize the fact that what they do is not who they are, and the idea that who they are is love (for more on this check out GENM's children's book [Heart's Treasure Hunt](#)).

How To Create A Time-In Space

- Choose your space together. Even a [small space](#) can work well!
- Hang your posters using double-sided tape or [frames and velcro](#) to secure them to the wall. Using play-based social-emotional learning activities when your child is calm, like [SnuggleBuddies](#) and [PeaceMakers](#) (both included in our [Time-In ToolKit Bundle](#)), will help them embrace and use these new skills when they are not.
- Chat with your child about the items they would like to include in your new calming space. See the Digital Manual that comes free with every [Time-In ToolKit](#), including a printable list of items to help children regulate (most of which you can gather from around your house to create a calming time-in basket).

Take all of your child's senses into consideration when designing your space. Have your children help and have fun creating the space together.

How To Use A Time-In Space

Using the Calming Corner you are guided in creating with the Time-In ToolKit will help your children ages 3+ strengthen their ability to notice feeling sensations in their bodies. From there, you will be guided in how to teach your children to name these emotions, and finally, in how to regulate (just a fancy word for "manage") them. All of this happens best with a heavy dose of connection and play.

Here are five tips to help you successfully introduce and use the Calming Corner you've created with your children:

1. Transform YOUR triggers.

The process of using a Calming Corner in your home starts and ends with you. Be aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and notice any triggers that may be knocking you off your center. Our [online course](#) is a game-changer if you could use support in getting to the source of your triggers, as is this free introductory video on [taming triggers](#).

2. Introduce the tools during non-heated moments.

For two weeks prior to using your calming space during heated moments, spend 5 to 10 minutes a day playing games from your Time-In ToolKit's Digital Manual or Curriculum Guide Book in the space. Reading books, snuggle up, and make time to practice and learn about the different emotions presented in the 32 Feelings Faces poster included in the kit. As your child begins to feel both safe and motivated to visit the space on their own or with you during non-heated moments, they will feel more confident and engaged in using the space when they are dysregulated.

Some activities include:

- Roleplay with favorite dolls, figurines, or stuffed animals
- Read children's books with your child that [teach kids about emotions](#)
- Place a mirror by your Calming Strategies poster and invite your child to make different faces in the mirror. Practice matching them with the faces on the 32 Feeling Faces poster that comes in your kit (mad, sad, tired, surprised, silly, etc)
- Create art to express the many different emotions we all feel. Ask your child, "Can you show me what feeling "happy" looks like in your body? (Mad? Calm? Etc...)"
- Play [Feelings Bingo](#)

3. Create daily playful rituals.

Here are a few ideas for playful rituals you can share on a daily basis in your Calming Corner using your Time-In ToolKit, and bonus, each takes just about 5 minutes or less:

- Pull a card from the PeaceMakers Mindfulness Card deck with your children each morning. Take a few minutes to talk about the card, and use it to set your family's "intention of the day". Throughout the day, talk about the card you pulled and what it means to you. Here are [more ways to play](#) with the PeaceMakers Cards.
- Use the SnuggleBuddies every evening at bedtime. Sit in the Calming Corner with your child, or snuggle up together in bed or on the couch and talk about the emotions that came up for both you and your child that day. Hold the colored SnuggleBuddies mood emoji that goes with the feeling you are sharing about in your hand (happy = yellow, sad = blue, calm = green, and mad/scared = red). Here are some [other fun ways to play](#) with the SnuggleBuddies to grow your child's emotional intelligence.

4. Use the tools yourself.

The next time you are feeling a tad bit dysregulated (aka annoyed, frustrated, angry, sad), show your children that the Calming Corner is a helpful space in your home for you to use as well. Go to your calming space and point to the emotion on the 32 Feeling Faces poster that best represents how you are feeling and then do one or two calming strategies to help you shift. Use the "What Can I Do?" Activity Mat to guide your time-in, just as you might with your child. Children learn by watching the things we do much more than they do by listening to the things we say. Reinforce the skills and behaviors that you are wanting to see from your children by using them yourself.

5. Be in the moment with your kids.

In the midst of a tantrum, invite your child to join you in your Calming Corner, not to talk so much as to help them feel supported as they practice calming their body. Hugs, rocking, breathing, squeezing a ball, taking a drink of water; all of the many strategies featured in the Time-In ToolKit can help, and once they are calm, you can help them become aware of the things they were thinking and/or feeling when they became overwhelmed or upset.

If the time-in was sparked by a conflict with another person, ask your child what they imagine the other person might have been thinking and/or feeling.

Not only do time-ins build the connections or neurosynapses of the brain, but they also help to normalize all emotions, even the unpleasant feeling ones like anger, sadness, and jealousy. The point is not to stop our children from feeling mad, sad, etc. but to help them to notice, name, express, and ultimately, to manage these big and often overpowering feelings in healthy ways.

The Power of Positive Attention

How to use it (instead of negative attention) to change behavior

By: Katherine Martinelli & Child Mind Institute

When kids are misbehaving, it is natural for parents and educators to want to correct them, pointing out — sometimes not too calmly — what they are doing wrong. Though this may seem like common sense, it can actually backfire.

Experts have found that giving kids positive rather than negative attention is much more effective in changing behavior. Research shows that praise for behavior you want to encourage gets more results than calling out things you want them to stop doing.

So what do we mean by positive attention? And how is focusing on the positive, instead of the negative, different from “looking the other way” and letting kids off the hook when they misbehave?

What is positive attention?

It's easy to respond harshly when kids are doing something they're not supposed to and not react at all when they're doing what we expect of them. Positive attention requires a lens shift in which we call out kids for good behavior and ignore (at least in the moment) the not-so-good.

The idea is that for children, parental attention is so powerful that whatever behavior we pay attention to will increase, even if we're telling them to stop.

Essentially, rather than chiding them for what they're doing wrong we want to catch kids doing right. It's a simple shift, but one that goes against centuries of parenting norms and takes some practice before it becomes second nature.

How to implement positive attention

So what does this look like in practice? Positive attention can take many forms, including verbal praise, hugs, kisses, high fives or rewards. It may look different for a three-year-old than it does for a teen, but the basic idea is the same. The key, explains Lindsay Gerber, PsyD, a clinical psychologist, is being as descriptive and specific as possible in your praise so that children know exactly what behavior they should replicate. Experts sometimes call this giving “labeled praise.”

Instead of saying “great job!” or “I love how you're doing that,” try to spell out exactly what they are doing well. For example, you could say “I love how you are sharing your crayons with your sibling” or “it's awesome that you finished your homework before asking to use your tablet.” No matter their age, letting kids know that you appreciate their behavior will make them feel good, and when they know exactly what they are being praised for they will be more likely to do it again in the future.

But what about bad behavior?

This is the part that may be the most challenging. If a child is behaving in a way that is unsafe for themselves or others, then of course an adult should intervene. Otherwise, do your best to ignore the behavior then provide positive attention when they stop. Child behavior experts call this “active ignoring.” By withdrawing your attention, you are sending the message that acting out is not the way for them to get what they want. You reinforce this message when, as soon as you see them calming themselves down or obeying an instruction, you do give them your attention.



Just because you are ignoring a behavior in the moment doesn't mean that you don't ever address it or that you are pandering to your child; quite the opposite. "When you're seeing a behavior that you want to decrease, that's really not the time to interact with the kid," says Dr. Gerber. "That's a time to take a deep breath, notice it, maybe gently try to redirect them to something else or actively ignore it."

Redirecting them can be anything from asking if they want a snack to pointing out something fun coming up on the family calendar. Later, when things have calmed down, you can circle back around to talk about it.

Positive attention in action

How does the framework of positive attention work in a challenging situation? Let's take a scenario any parent will experience at some point: your child throwing a tantrum in the check out line at the grocery store because they want a candy bar. Giving in and letting them have the candy bar would likely stop the tantrum quickly, but it would also guarantee that the behavior would repeat itself. Negotiating (you can have a brownie when we get home) would likely have the same effect.

Many parents feel judging eyes on them in a public space and feel that they need to make a show out of being firm with their child by telling them to stop, raising their voice, or issuing ultimatums. Chances are this kind of response won't make you or your child feel very good, and also won't prevent the behavior from reoccurring, since you are inadvertently reinforcing the behavior by feeding it attention.

If you are practicing positive attention, however, you would ignore the tantrum until it's over (which is of course easier said than done). As soon as the child is calming down, that's the time to give positive attention and praise. "I'm really proud of you for calming down, for taking a few deep breaths, and for understanding that this is not something we could do right now."

When you're back home and things are less emotional, then you can address the tantrum. Dr. Gerber says to use a lot of validation when talking with your child in this scenario. For example, saying "I saw in the grocery store that it was really hard for you when I told you that you couldn't have the candy. When I say no to something, that means that we can't have it in that moment. So next time something like that happens, what do you think we can do? How do you think that we can better manage?"

In this way, Dr. Gerber says, "you've acknowledged and reflected back their emotional experience and their wants and needs in that moment, and you're also reaffirming your expectations and your boundaries and priorities as a parent." She says that an interaction like this also helps teach kids to problem solve by modeling, and increases their agency and ownership over their behavior.

It's important to note that ignoring something like a tantrum won't make it stop immediately. In fact, Dr. Gerber tells parents to be mindful of the "extinction burst" — in other words, it's going to get worse before it gets better. So the intensity of the tantrum may increase before it stops completely, and it also may take a few times of ignoring tantrums or other behaviors before they cease.



What to do if the behavior doesn't stop

If you continue to see behaviors you are trying to extinguish, then Dr. Gerber says it may be time to team up with a mental health provider to create an individualized plan of action for you and your child. Something like a behavior chart can be very effective, especially if the reward is positive attention. If the end goal is too challenging for the child to start out, you can break it down into smaller, more manageable goals that can help pave the way to achieving the desired ultimate outcome.

Sometimes all it takes for a teen to change their behavior is a little appreciation. Teenagers are self-absorbed by nature, but that doesn't mean your teen doesn't care how you feel. If it's important to you to eat dinner as a family, sans phones, say so. "It really meant a lot to me when we all ate together the other night. It was so nice having no phones or distractions, it made me feel like we were able to really hear each other."

Creating a stronger bond

Transitioning to a model of positive attention takes patience and practice on the part of the parent. Sometimes you might backtrack and lose your cool, and that's okay. We're only human. If that happens, turn it into a teachable moment by apologizing, expressing your own frustrations, and talking about what you can do differently next time. Dr. Gerber says that the mental health provider you're working with can be support for you, too. "We're also providing support to parents, because whenever we're thinking of changing a child's behavior, a parent really plays a very big role," she says.

Another thing that can be helpful in the long run is carving out even just 10 minutes a day of check-in time. During this time, a parent can give their child undivided attention doing an activity they enjoy, whether it's playing a card game, doing a puzzle, building with LEGOs or making some art. "We want to build that into their schedule on a daily basis, and to make sure that we are giving them attention in a positive way," says Dr. Gerber. "Because if they're not getting that attention, they're going to seek it another way.

In the end, beyond addressing behavior, utilizing positive attention can create a stronger bond with your child. "And what we know about children's mental health in general," adds Dr. Gerber, "is that having a positive relationship with any adult — whether it's a parent, a grandparent, a caregiver, or someone in the community — is just an overall protective factor against other mental health disorders or symptoms."



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