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Behavior Management

The following information includes general guidelines and recommendations to address difficulties with behavioral regulation in the home setting. It is designed to provide initial guidance and resources for parents whose children are struggling with temper tantrums, aggression, increased emotionality, and behavioral outbursts. These guidelines are most appropriate for children between the ages of 4 and 9.

Structuring the Home Environment for Success

- **Increase structure and predictability as much as possible at home**. Use highly structured routines, recipes, checklists, and other visual interventions to teach your child in a step-by-step fashion. Break complex activities into simple step-by-step tasks, and keep these steps on a visual checklist. Reduce open ended and unstructured tasks. Your child may benefit from the use of a visual schedule or other concrete cues about what to expect next at home.
- **Most children respond well to praise.** Use praise to motivate your child, adhering to a ratio of four praise statements to each correction or command. The praise should be specific and true, or they will quickly learn to disregard it. This 4:1 ratio has been shown in research to be highly effective at treating behavioral difficulties, and will likely help your child significantly. Concrete reinforcements, such as stickers or check marks, can also be helpful for children with language impairments.
- **Try to "catch" your child being good** and provide praise for specific positive behavior that you name (e.g., "You showed good self-control just now" or "I like how you're cooperating" or "Thank you for being flexible."). Positive feedback needs to outweigh negative feedback over time, even if it means praising your child for small good behaviors and ignoring many negative behaviors. But it is also important that they receive feedback about negative behaviors so these are not unintentionally reinforced by letting them avoid/escape what is upsetting them. Planned ignoring of minor negative behavior is, in fact, a useful strategy in and of itself, because any attention to a behavior tends to reinforce it to some extent.
- **Create a Positive Behavior Management Program/Behavior Chart** that reinforces a few specific skills (e.g., putting away dirty clothes at night, brushing teeth without reminders) with clearly documented visual charts of progress and rewards. Please see *Creating A Behavioral Plan* handout for more information and resources.

Strategies to Improve Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

- **Clear rules and expectations for behavior across settings**, including emotional modulation, is helpful for children. Such explicit expectations can provide predictability and a feeling of control over the situation, in turn allowing for better emotional modulation.
- **Model appropriate emotional modulation.** It may be helpful for parents and caregivers to talk aloud through a situation that provokes feelings of anger or sadness, and explain how they will deal with their feelings.
- **Introduce a metaphor for your child's emotions**. Children with strong emotional responses to events or situations may benefit from learning a concrete, simple metaphor to help increase emotional monitoring and increase the likelihood of a more appropriate response. For example, your child might work in therapy or with a school counselor to develop a "thermometer" or "speedometer" metaphor for measuring anger or distress. They might label each temperature or speed to reflect degrees of

anger, such as "10 = normal, 20 = irritated, 30 = getting mad....100 = out of control." Each level can then be tied to a specific concrete behavior, such as counting to delay responses, relaxation techniques, terminating the conversation, seeking adult intervention, or immediately leaving the situation.

- **Provide opportunities to discuss upcoming situations or events that may provoke an emotional outburst.** This helps children by increasing their awareness of the potential for emotional reactivity and the likely consequences may help them modulate more effectively in the moment.
- **Processing situations that have led to emotional outbursts** with your child in a non-threatening setting and manner is important. Choose a time when they are relaxed and therefore more receptive to objective analysis of what happened. This can help your child gain better control while increasing their awareness of their reactions.
- **Provide feedback individually and privately.** Most children have a need to "save face." When possible speak to your child privately and avoid punishing or correcting them in front of others, including siblings.

Additional Resources

- *1-2-3 Magic: 3-Step Discipline for Calm, Effective, and Happy Parenting* by Thomas W. Phelan, PhD
- *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish
- *SOS Help for Parents* by Lynn Clark, PhD
- *The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children* by Ross W. Greene, PhD
- *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child* by Alan E. Kazdin, Ph.D.
- *The Orchid and the Dandelion: Why Some Children Struggle and How All Can Thrive* by Tom Boyce, MD
- *Your Defiant Child: Eight Steps to Better Behavior (Second Edition)* by Russell A. Barkley, PhD & Christine M. Benton

- **Behavioral therapy/Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT).** If additional support is needed or initial attempts at the implementing the above strategies are unsuccessful, your family may benefit from individual/family therapy. A Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) approach is often helpful for to address behavioral difficulties in young children by providing parental strategies as well as helping children to develop adaptive coping techniques. It also allows families to have ongoing support as they implement new rules and routines, as well as provide them with a resource for problem-solving obstacles as they arise. For more information about PCIT, please see: http://www.pcit.org/ (handout also available).