

Creating a Behavioral Plan

This summary is adapted from Gulf Coast Consultation at Tulane University, Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. <http://gcap.tulane.edu/>

The following information includes general guidelines and recommendations to create behavioral plans to address behavioral difficulties and introduce structure within the home setting. These guidelines are most appropriate for typically developing children between the ages of 2.5 and 9 (preschool to 3rd grade); for children with developmental disabilities this could be applied for older ages and grades.

What is a Behavioral Plan?

Behavioral plans are based on the well-known fact that children thrive on attention and approval from their parents. One way of implementing these plans is visually, through a Behavior Chart. Behavior charts are organized ways to make sure that your child knows you are proud of them when they do the kinds of behaviors you want to see. The more time your child spends on these positive behaviors, the less time they will have for negative behaviors that you do not want to see. Also, if your child does not get as much attention for the negative behaviors, he/she will be less likely to do those.

Identify Desired Behaviors

Desired behaviors will go in the behavior chart on the left column. In order for a behavioral plan to be successful, all caregivers (e.g., parents, grandparents, babysitters/nanny) need to be consistent in what behaviors to address, what behaviors to reinforce, and how this is implemented. Make copies of the charts to be used across weeks and caregiver settings; other formats include: dry-erase board, magnets, velcro, sticker charts.

- **Behaviors should be stated in positive terms.** Identify target behaviors based on what you WANT to see, not what you do not want to see. *For example: "Sit in your chair for dinner" (NOT: "don't get out of your chair") or "keep your hands to yourself" (NOT: "don't hit").*
- **Define desired behaviors specifically.** This will ensure that you and your child understand how the goal will be measured and so is it is easy to agree whether or not a behavior happened. *For example, "say thank you every time someone gives you something" (NOT: "be polite").* It is important these desired behaviors are ones that your child can perform daily and all caregivers can consistently reinforce.
- **Define goals clearly.** Details can also include the number of time or times of day. *For example, "go to bed when you are told" (NOT: "follow directions").*
- **Use single goals.** Goals should be specific about one behavior required, not multiple goals merged together. *For example, 1. "brush your teeth" (NOT: "brush your teeth and then get into bed").*
- **Tailor number of goals to age.** For 3- to 6-year-old children, three goals may be appropriate. For older children, five goals are usually manageable.
- **Include goals that are easy to achieve.** If using 3 goals, 1 should be easy for your child to achieve (or even something they are already demonstrating); if using 5 goals, 2 should be behaviors they can achieve easily. This will ensure that they will be able to experience success and thus, they are more likely to be motivated to work to achieve the more challenging goals.

Tracking and Reinforcers

- **How to track when your child demonstrates the desired behavior**
 - If your child cannot read, pictures or drawings can be used that depict the desired behavior
 - Stickers can be purchased in bulk at bargain stores or you can use markers in their choice of color.

- If your child likes drawing, they can draw their own star or smiley face in the chart.
- Other reusable methods: Magnets, Velcro, vinyl stickers
- **Identify reinforcers: determine what will happen if your child achieves minimum goal in a week**
 - For example, if using 3 goals, 75% achievement is 16 stars in 1 week; if using 5 goals, 75% achievement is 26 stars in 1 week.
 - Motivator/reinforcer does not need to be expensive, but should be something that your child will enjoy. Reading an extra book at bedtime or other ways of spending time with caregivers can be a powerful motivator (e.g., going to park, trip to get ice cream).
 - Reinforcers need to be feasible and not dependent on other factors (e.g., someone else's schedule, siblings, weather). Also consider where you are starting and be sure it will feel like a reward.
 - It is important to remember, the focus is on reinforcing good behaviors, not punishment (i.e., taking things away) if they do not achieve the goal.

Review and Implement

- **Review the chart/plan with your child**
 - Focus on positive behaviors. It is important that your child sees the chart as a way of demonstrating their accomplishments and to show how proud you are of good behavior, not as a punishment.
 - Set clear expectations: It is important that your child fully understands what the desired behaviors and rewards are before the plan is implemented.
 - Have your child help design the behavior chart. Present options and let your child help choose how they will be tracking (stickers, markers, etc.). Your child may also enjoy decorating the chart/plan.
 - Identify rewards together. Discuss and determine what they are working towards; offer a few choices to help your child feel like they are actively involved in the plan. This can be done each time there is a new chart for the week/month.
- **Implement the behavior plan**
 - Keep the chart in a central place so that you will not forget about it at the end of the day. If your child is likely to rip or destroy the chart, place it out of reach (e.g., high on the refrigerator).
 - If your child earns a sticker/star, celebrate it together, even if they only achieve one for the day or it is one that is “easy” to achieve. Reinforcement is key.
 - If your child does not do the behavior, leave the space blank. Do not put punishments, sad faces, or other signs of failure in the box.
 - Do not focus on unwanted behaviors. Giving attention to unwanted negative behaviors can actually increase the chance your child will keep doing it. If they had a “bad day,” the format of the behavior plan/chart is that the next day is a new start and they will be able to earn stickers and continue working toward their goal.
 - If bedtime behaviors are a goal, the behavior should be marked off in the morning. Otherwise, it is usually best to incorporate the behavior review into the pre-bedtime routine.
 - Be consistent. In order for your child to learn new skills and establish positive routines and habits, consistency is key—across caregivers and days. For example, if the desired behavior is getting dressed independently this can't be skipped one morning because the family is running late. This in fact reinforces the opposite of the desired behavior.
 - Stick with it! It is not unusual for the negative behaviors to increase for a short time when you start using the behavior chart as a way for your child to test to see if they can keep getting your attention for the negative behaviors and if you really mean it. They will decrease again after a week or two.
 - Adjust over time. Once your child is easily achieving most of the stars for a few weeks, you can change the goals to encourage even more positive behaviors that might have been too hard for them at first. For example, if the original goal was to sit in a chair for dinner, but your child is still having trouble at other meals, the goal can be changed to “sit in your chair for all meals”, and the star could only be earned if your child meets that goal.