

## Evoking Positive Behavior

Caring for any child can be challenging at times, and these challenges change as a child develops. Toddlers strive to be more independent, yet they lack the ability to self-regulate effectively which can result in challenging behaviors. Adolescents are faced with physical and hormonal changes and a more complex social environment, and these changes present their own set of challenges. When you take into account these normal developmental milestones together with the language and social deficits that autism presents, it becomes clear why a child with autism may sometimes display undesirable behaviors. Here are some things that you can do to evoke more positive behaviors:

- 1) **Setting up the environment** – One of the first things to think about is how you can provide a safe and consistent environment for your child. This could include creating predictable daily routines, using visual schedules or removing disturbing or distracting items from the environment. If there are things in the child's environment that lead to challenging behavior, it may be helpful to remove them.
- 2) **Redirection** – A technique that works well when a child displays an undesirable behavior is redirection. Here, you quickly interrupt an undesirable behavior as soon as possible, and then redirect them to an appropriate behavior.
- 3) **Differential reinforcement** – Reinforcement is one of the most effective ways to evoke positive behaviors in a child. You should reinforce behaviors that you want to see, and NOT reinforce behaviors that you don't want to see. This is easier said than done, because at times it is easier to give in to a child's tantrums and reinforce the bad behavior than it is to refuse their demands consistently. However, differential reinforcement means being mindful of only rewarding positive behavior. The goal of differential reinforcement is to increase desirable behaviors and decrease undesirable behaviors without the use of punishment.
- 4) **Shaping behaviors** – Shaping is a technique, where you use reinforcement to increase approximations of the behaviors you would like to see. You need to work with the limits of the child's own abilities, to avoid this becoming an unpleasant experience for the child. For children who do not use language, pictures can be used for shaping.
- 5) **Response effort** – People are likely to engage in the least effortful behavior that results in what they want. If it is too difficult for a child to get what they want, they may resort to screaming and kicking or throwing things because it gets them the attention they need and things that they want. The idea here is that if you make it easier for them to get what they want, they won't need to engage in this kind of challenging behavior. So if a child has to scream to get your attention while you are cooking, calling out to them or taking a quick 30 second break to check in on them while they are calm might eliminate the need for them to scream.
- 6) **Be an advocate for your child** – Communicate with your child's caretakers, teachers and extended family to help them understand what works well for your child when your child is in their care. If you know that redirection and prompting really help your child demonstrate positive behaviors, explain that to others around your child so that they can work effectively with your child. Don't assume that they know what works for your child. Share visual support items that you use, be clear about your child's schedule, and their strong likes and dislikes. That information can make a huge difference to someone caring for your child.

There are many ways in which you can evoke more positive behaviors from your child. All of them involve your putting thought and effort into making simple changes for your child. Just being aware of what may be evoking undesirable behaviors can help you identify what needs to change in your child's environment. Discuss these options in more detail with your child's therapist.