

香港資優教育學院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

Factsheet

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

Many gifted and talented children have challenging behaviour ranging from withdrawal to constant demands for attention and, in extreme cases, to open anger and aggression. All of these are difficult to deal with, particularly because highly able children can think through any strategies tried by parents to curb the behaviour and may argue parents into a corner. Any sanctions applied often have a limited time period for which they will work, after which even very young children reason that sanctions are usually temporary and rarely anything to worry too much about. All of this leaves parents feeling that life is a running battle and as such very hard work.

Any strategies that are adopted need to be carefully thought through and (this is the most important) consistently applied. Trying something out for a week is not sufficient as an able child will soon learn that they need only persist for a week and the strategy will disappear. Bear in mind that any behaviour has taken time to learn and may take an equal amount of time to "unlearn" before changes can be made.

If you are going to work on behaviour pick out the key bits of the behaviour that are the most difficult and only pick one or two at a time. This selection of what is most important is essential to help parents stay sane. Arguing continuously over small issues that are not so important (though none the less irritating) is very tiring and often counter productive. Ignoring the elbows on the table while you tackle the aggression or dangerous behaviour can make each day less of a battle. The little things can be worked on later. Prioritise!

Modelling Behaviour

Children learn behaviour. The most difficult thing for most parents is recognising that their own behaviour is often reflected in their child. Being inconsistent (backing down on a request or instruction, even once) means a child knows that they will get what they want eventually; they just have to persist. Picking up on things that are not important, having arguments over small things means a child knows that to get your full attention they just have to annoy you a little bit. Failing to carry through on a threat, even if it does affect the rest of the family, means a child knows they will still get rewards however they behave.

It is important to recognise that just demanding that a child change their behaviour is one thing but often children need to be taught how to change it. Asking a very angry child to stop being angry probably won't work.

One approach is to target specific types of behaviour: it can't all be changed at once. Demonstrate to the child that adults feel this way too and share with the child any time in the day when you are feeling that way. Show the child a method of stopping the feelings by for example, calming down, talking calmly and safely, listening, reassuring.

Say to the child, "I am feeling really cross, I want to shout really loudly and call people names but I don't think I should because I know it is the wrong thing to do". Think of using some of the following methods to model calm behaviour - sit down quietly with a warm drink and listen to some nice music/read a book/ watch TV/have a hug with your child. Select whatever method works for you and

香港資優教育學院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

Factsheet

the child.

Later when the child is in a situation where you know he/she will get wound up or when you see it starting then point it out to him/her and ask him/her if he/she will go with you to do your calming down methods together. After a long while of consistently doing this the child should start to recognise its own trigger points and take an appropriate course of action.

This approach works equally with other worrying behaviours such as excessive worrying, over self-criticism, worrying about what others think, etc. Describe to the child when you are feeling that way and what you will do about it and then help the child to do the same.

Appropriate Rewards

Children will often need to see a real reason for altering their behaviour. If they are behaving well but it goes unnoticed then perhaps they get more for behaving badly, even though you may think it is negative. Some children need rewarding for very small patches of good behaviour, spot them doing the right thing, even for a second and grab the opportunity to thank them and make them feel good about it. There are lots of ways of rewarding children including collecting money, stickers or tokens for a weekly treat or collecting minutes of time for special time weekly, daily or even every half-day if necessary.

It can often help parents to feel better about what goes on in the home if the focus changes to the good things rather than every second being about the negative things.

Do bear in mind that sometimes rewards become less effective over time as a child gets used to it or finds different interests. Be prepared to find new rewards, not bigger, just different ones. The token system could remain but the end result for the child might need to change.

Appropriate Sanctions

Applying sanctions is the most difficult thing to do for many parents but is even more so for parents of gifted children. Any sanction has to be something the child does not want to happen. The key thing to remember is that every action has a consequence and if children don't learn this early on then they may become adults with even bigger issues.

For some children a sufficient sanction is the withdrawal of adult attention. Many parents feel that they want to talk through the child's actions with them straight away. The problem is that this gives the child attention, which may have been their aim (although they may not have consciously thought it through). Sometimes it is more effective to walk away after making sure the child is safe and telling them what he/she has done is wrong. You can discuss it later if it is really obvious that it needs explanation.

Often a sanction with more impact is necessary. It could be the withdrawal of a particular toy, time out in a boring place or the loss of a privilege. The timescale for the duration of such sanctions needs to be relevant to the child in question. A short time in a boring timeout may be effective, particularly for younger children (you could follow the one minute per year of age rule). For withdrawal of a

香港資優教育學院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

Factsheet

privilege or a toy then the time period needs to be one that makes it effective. It is no good taking away a toy for a day unless the child sees that as a big problem. Too short a period and they will just wait it out, sometimes marking the days on the calendar to show their lack of concern.

The end of a sanction must accompany a reminder of why it was lost and an apology from the child. No apology then the sanction continues. Children must learn too that an apology also means a change in behaviour for the next time or the sanction is applied again possibly in a firmer or longer time frame.

Connecting a sanction with the rewards system can mean that a child could lose or regain points or tokens throughout the period specified. Some people dislike the idea of children losing points but again, there are consequences for behaviour and children can see that their good behaviour and hard work is ruined by their bad behaviour - it often makes bad behaviour much more understandable and personal to themselves. High-ability children more than others need to be taught responsibility for their actions from an early age.

Adapted from NAGC Factsheet

With thanks to © The National Association For Gifted Children Limited ("NAGC")
for providing the materials on which this article/section was based.

