

Common Behavioral Issues & Recommendations for Children with Down Syndrome

Inappropriate behavioral responses are usually related to:

- Communication issues – difficulty verbally expressing when they are tired, **sick**, angry, frustrated, etc.
- Auditory processing and delayed processing speed – difficulty with some verbal instructions and when not allowed ample time to respond.
- Sensory seeking or defensiveness
- Difficulties reading subtle social cues (e.g. personal space, assessing what is friendly versus threatening behavior, and being socially savvy).

Time In:

- Spending quality, positive time with the child, so you have a relationship where your time and opinion are valued and/or respected by the child.
- Positive reinforcement works usually well, so provide praise when the child is behaving appropriately, even for a few seconds. Praise should be genuine and **specific** – let the child know exactly what he/she did that you are proud of. Many children will get ‘hooked’ on the positive praise and removal of this will reduce inappropriate behavior.

Prevention:

- Identify triggers & attempts to eliminate these. For example, children will have ‘meltdowns’ when they are tired or hungry, so try not to schedule important events during these times. If transitions are difficult, keep these to a minimum. If the child needs more personal space, use visual cues and educate peers to respect boundaries.
- Provide directions and explanations that are brief and use consistent and developmentally appropriate language – lectures will not be remembered or effective. Use the same terms and try to use language phrased in positive terms, but still conveys the message.

Assess the Motivation for the Behavior:

- Conduct behavioral observations and track the behavior to provide adequate information of precipitators, consequences and setting/time of the behavior. Enlist an observer and log your observations.
- *Sensory Seeking or Avoidant* = Redirect & meet sensory need in safe and socially appropriate way
- *Attention Seeking* = Ignore (unless dangerous)
- *Avoidance or Delay* = Assist young child in completing the task or ‘wait out’ the older child. When using physical assistance, be quick and immediately praise.
- *Aggressive or Destructive* = Developmentally appropriate discipline strategies (e.g. Time Out, Removal of privileges, token economy, etc.)

Annoying or Attention-Seeking

Ignore and/or redirect the child's attention. Do not acknowledge or make eye contact and point out something else in environment or routine – “Oh, look at the _____”. Because negative attention is better than no attention, how you react is just as important as the discipline strategy you use.

Teach and practice how to appropriately obtain attention and when and where they cannot (e.g. during story time, while you are on the phone, etc.).

Avoidance or Delay

For children who are throwing objects or having tantrums, **begin** by allowing discontinuation only after they exhibit an appropriate request or response (e.g. When the child calmly says/signs “I’m all done” or “No thanks”).

Once the child has established this skill, then encouraged the child to complete brief activities or complete “one more” of a lengthy activity. Also use “First-then” cues. Discontinuation should occur on the adult's terms, not the child's.

Once the child is relatively compliant with this technique, then assist them in completing longer activities. For example, if the child refuses to pick up blocks at cleanup time, use hand-over-hand assistance to help the child complete the activity. Do not reinforce the goal of avoidance.

Assist the young or smaller child in completing the activity and ‘wait out’ the older or larger child, whom you cannot safely physically redirect.

Aggressive or Destructive

If behaviors result from an emotional response, help the child label the emotions associated and provide an appropriate outlet or behavioral response to the emotion.

Decide on what is most appropriate discipline strategy for your child and family and try it for several months. If it is ineffective, try something else. You may need to change strategies over time to meet the developmental needs of the child. May want to reintroduce a strategy at a later time. Can use removal of privileges for children who can remember their privileges and the consequences for misbehavior and who can (to some degree) self-regulate their behavior.

To introduce Time out, choose a high frequency inappropriate behavior and focus on that one. When the child engages in the behavior, calmly say only “No ----- Time out” and calmly place child in designated Time Out location without saying anything or establishing eye contact. Set timer and step outside the room, move across the room or busy yourself with something. At conclusion of Time Out, remind the child of why they were in Time Out & the appropriate behavior, but do not continue to nag or lecture – just start over.

Other Behavioral Issues and Strategies

To aide in increased attention span and appropriate transition between activities:

- Utilize visual strategies (e.g. flash lights at cleanup time) and picture cues and schedules for daily activities.
- Sing directions or silly songs during transitions (e.g. to line up or wash hands).
- Utilize movement/sensory breaks or incorporate movement activities wherever possible (e.g. carrying heavy books or marching to next activity) and reward sensory –seekers with sensory input for appropriate behavior (e.g. high-5s, deep pressure or hugs).
- Utilizing ‘fidgets’ to keep wandering hands busy. Have distractible children be ‘helpers’ (e.g. holding the door, turning the pages of the book, handing out papers, etc.).
- Use “First – Then” cues with picture card of token economy activity choice after given # of completed tasks.

To aide in appropriate peer relationships:

- Use social stories and role- plays to teach and practice issues related to personal space, taking turns, obtaining someone’s attention, interpreting facial expressions and body language, etc.
- Encourage peers, siblings and staff to ignore annoying or attention seeking (but not harmful) behaviors.
- Encourage staff and peers to develop realistic expectations of the child’s behavior (e.g. he may always be more wiggly) and develop a plan ahead of time for how to respond to inappropriate behaviors.
- Develop an appropriate communication system for the child to obtain both adult and peer attention (e.g. tapping on shoulder or saying “excuse me”) and encourage peers to provide their attention if the child utilizes an appropriate and agreed-upon method.

To decrease throwing:

Throwing is often an attempt to communicate frustration, therefore if it is related to the level of difficulty of the task, modify the task. However, if it does not appear related to the difficulty of the task:

- Minimize opportunities for throwing (even a few seconds at a time) and praise the child for not throwing (e.g. “Good hands”)
- Reward the child with increased independence (For example, “Good hands Mary, now you can hold your cup like a big girl”.
- If she does throw, calmly say “No throwing” with minimal reaction and eye contact. Use hand-over-hand assistance to help her pick it up and place it out of her reach, but within sight.
- If she requests the object, tell her “No -----. No throwing. You can have it with good hands”. Try to reintroduce object several minutes later or she needs to use the object (e.g cup) while you are also holding it.

Every child is different and what works for one child, may not work for another. Similarly, what worked well at one time, may not work when your child enters a new developmental phase.

The inappropriate behavior typically increases in intensity or frequency as the child tests you, but should subside once he/she understands there is ALWAYS the same discipline strategy to the inappropriate behavior. Therefore, CONSISTENCY is the MOST IMPORTANT aspect of any behavioral plan. It is less important *what* you do, than you do it *every time*.