

Getting Behavior in Shape at Home

Written by Laura Riffel and

Edited by Ann Turnbull

Positive behavior support, often called PBS, is not just for schools. Parents can use the same ideas to create a better environment for the entire family. First, let's look at what PBS is:

1. Deciding what behavior you want to change
2. Deciding how you want that behavior to change
3. Using behavior science to change that behavior
 - a. Develop a theory about why you think the behavior is occurring
 - b. Test your theory
4. Using supports that have been tested and proven to work
 - a. Teach new skills to get the same results
 - b. Change environments and daily routines
 - c. Reward positive behaviors

Positive behavior support does not mean changing the child; rather, it means creating a new environment that supports the positive behavior you want to achieve. It means creating a plan that determines who will help and what you will do differently. So how do you do this?

Younger children:

Let's take a hypothetical child: Let's call the child Taylor.

- Taylor refuses to eat dinner almost every night.
- Let's think about what behavior we want:

We want Taylor to eat a healthy, balanced dinner.

Let's brainstorm reasons that Taylor may be refusing to eat:

- Taylor doesn't like the food.
- Taylor fills up on other things before dinner.
- Parents give lots of attention when dinner is refused.

Let's test the reasons that Taylor won't eat dinner:

- Ask Taylor to help plan the menu with favorite foods.
- Limit Taylor on any snacks prior to dinner

- Give Taylor lots of attention by helping cook dinner, set the table, etc.
- As each reason is tested, note which one causes Taylor to eat more dinner.
- Praise positive results
- Let's assume that more is eaten when Taylor plans the menu.
- For the first few times, you may have to fix macaroni and cheese and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with jellybeans; however, Taylor eats the entire meal.
 - Praise Taylor for eating the entire meal.
- After several successful meals, as Taylor is planning the meal tell Taylor that you are going to fix 3 things. Taylor gets to choose all three but they must be from the choices you present.
- Give Taylor five choices and have Taylor choose three
 - Macaroni and cheese
 - Peanut butter and jelly
 - Hamburgers shaped like hearts
 - Celery filled with peanut butter and raisin ants (call them "ants on a log")
 - Pears decorated to look like a funny animal
- Notice how two of the choices were the things that Taylor has already proven likelihood of eating. Tell Taylor that if the plate is clean, it will be Taylor's choice the next evening.
- As Taylor eats more and more, give increasing praise for eating dinner and for doing a good job of planning a good meal.
- Keep changing the choices to healthy choices until you are actually replacing the macaroni and cheese and peanut butter and jelly with more healthy choices.
- Eventually, Taylor will be willing to try new things as taste buds evolve.
 - Taylor feels powerful because there was choice in the meals and now has acceptance of varied foods.
- We changed the environment, and it produced more positive results than demanding that Taylor eat dinner. How many of us remember sitting at the table until it was bedtime because we refused to eat our vegetables? I doubt it really made us want to eat them again the next time.

In the interest of peace and harmony, does it matter if we altered the child's environment to get what we want or do we want him or her to do it because we say so? Most of us do the things we do because there is a payoff. Would you go to work every day if you did not get paid? We do not have to pay our children to be good, but we do have to alter the environment so there is a payoff for good behavior. Usually the pay off is more attention from parents or a friend.

Most of the time our children misbehave because they want attention and the only way they can think of to get it is to misbehave. How many times have you been in the grocery store behind a mother who is asking her child the following questions?

- Do you want a spanking?
- Do you want me to take you out to the car?
- Do you want me to tell your father when we get home?

Children cry, grab, scream and beg because they want to communicate something to you. The only way to change this habit is to teach them what we call “replacement behaviors”. These are new behaviors that are socially acceptable. The only way to teach these behaviors is to model and practice them.

Have your child switch roles with you. Tell him or her ahead of time that you are going to practice asking for things and learning the difference between yes and no. Tell your child this is going to be fun because s/he gets to be the parent for an hour. Don't worry about what people will think of you in the store. Think about what they think of you when your child is screaming “I want...”

Walk through the cereal aisle at the store and do the following:

- Pick up a box of cereal that has a toy in that you want
- Walk over to your child and say, “I'd really like to have this cereal this week because it has a CD game of Monopoly in the box.”
- I promise I will eat this cereal even if it tastes horrible, because I want the game.

Tell your child ahead of time to tell you “No” to whatever you ask for.

- When your child tells you “no,” ask him or her for a reason.
- Accept his or her reason and put the cereal on the shelf.

Then have your child do the same thing back to you

- Have him or her choose a box of cereal that has a toy in it wants
- Have him or her tell you they would like the cereal because of the toy
- Have him or her promise he or she will eat the cereal no matter what

Tell him or her no

- Have him or her ask you for a reason and then give one
- When they accept your reason praise him or her for following directions
- Practice this several times and then practice it several more time during subsequent trips to various stores with various items.

On the same days that you practice saying “no,” also practice saying “yes.” Have him or her model saying “thank you” and then compliment him or her on his or her manners. You will need to model this the same way you did for the “no” model.

It isn't a miracle, and it isn't going to happen over night. But soon, you will start to see a difference when you tell your child “no.” It is fair for him or her to understand why you said, “no,” so explaining your reason is reasonable. Your children will respect you for not using the “I'm the mommy that's why,” and you will respect him or her for using good manners by accepting your reason. Be honest in your reason. “It's too expensive.” “It's not good for you.” “I don't have the money this week,” are all good responses.

The most important lesson is to practice, practice, and practice the new behavior. You have to be consistent. If you say “no” and give a reason, then don’t give in and purchase the item if further begging ensues. This only tells the child that you have a breaking point and to keep trying. If you’ve said “no” and given a reason, then you should not say “no” again nor give another reason. When your child accepts your answer and your reason, then it is very important for you to compliment him or her on this good behavior. It is also very important that both parents and/or caregivers are consistent.

What can you do if the above does not work? The truth is every child is different, even children in the same family. What works for some children doesn’t work for all. Here are some other ideas:

- When you enter a store remind your child that you have “X” dollars to spend and that anything they want to add will go over the limit which might take away from something else they want (going to the movies).
- Give your child \$5 or whatever limit you want to set. Tell your child he or she may ask for something but he or she will have to be able to purchase it with the money that you have set aside for extras. If your child wants a certain cereal, then he or she will have to pay for it. Suddenly, your child will likely become very choosy about what he or she purchases.

Tips for older children:

This is a personal experience that worked well for my own children:

We quickly became indebted to fast food restaurants, video stores, and the popular teen clothing establishments. We investigated the reason for this loss of money and determined: 1) we let it happen because we kept giving our children more money, and 2) our children didn’t understand the concept of budgeting. We decided to remedy this by creating a budget box. We bought a plastic recipe box and put in envelopes and labeled them:

- Pizza
- Movies
- Videos
- Fast food
- Gas money
- Gifts for friends
- New clothing

Each month we put in a certain amount of money in each envelope. If our children wanted to order pizza, they had to check the budget box and pay for it from the appropriate envelope. Suddenly, coupons were very important to them when coupons were a dirty word when mom and dad footed the bill. Suddenly, those extra cokes at the drive through were not quite as important. They considered every purchase and weighed the options. If we had to drive our children somewhere, each child had to pay us one dollar out of the budget box. We wanted our children to understand that when they had their own cars, they would need to budget trips instead of driving all over town wasting gas.

We did not have to say “no” when asked about purchases. All we had to say was “check your envelope.” We allowed no trading from one “account” to the other. The children were responsible for their own box. They quickly realized that decisions regarding the whole month were more important than living for the moment. This created an environment where everyone was happy. Our children learned to think before they acted, and it was good practice for when they became independent young adults.

This method was far superior to ranting and raving about money which was an abstract idea to them. They saw that we had a checkbook, credit cards, and cash and did not understand that we would not have those items if we spent money every time we saw something we wanted. If they wanted something, our children learned to save from one month to next to make major purchases. We did not give them extra money; when we said “no” we meant “no,” and our reason was our budget.

We praised our children:

- when we checked their boxes at the end of the month
- when they paid for their own purchases
- when they saved up for something big

In the world of PBS, we changed the environment (basically we changed our behavior, we didn't dole out money any longer). We taught our children a new skill, and we provided positive feedback when they performed their new skills. Our hypothesis was that our children didn't understand the concept of budgeting. We proved that hypothesis when they learned to budget for themselves.