



Behavior Management Considerations for Children with Special Needs, by Cara Day



It's important for parents and teachers of special needs children to make on-going, individualized adjustments to their discipline and behavior-modification methods. We do everything we do in our lives with our abilities, not our disabilities. The considerations here can help you bring out your child's abilities so they can be more fully discovered, developed, and celebrated.

The videos and e-books referenced here are available at Daychild.org. They provide the specific, detailed language and methodologies you can use with your child. As you view the videos, modify the ideas as needed to meet the individual needs of your child and family.

1. Be consistent. We teach people how to treat us, and this is no less true with a special needs child than with any other person in our lives. Saying what you will do and doing what you say is critical to creating a sense of calm and security in your child's life. He doesn't need your unpredictability added in to his already more challenging life experience.

Give him the gift of follow-through. The parental energy you frontload into being consistent will come back to you and your child in positive ways, every day. The video, The Choice Chart, Part 2, has language and how-to for being consistent. Adjust the methods in these resources to fit the individual needs of your child and family.

2. Notice cause and effect. Special needs children benefit from seeing a strong correlation between cause and effect. If your child hits you on the arm, she needs to see your sad face, right away. If she throws her toys, she needs to see you pick them up, put them in a bin, and then put them up on a high shelf that she cannot reach, right away.

Whenever possible, she needs to see the immediate and natural consequences of her actions. Use a calm, unemotional voice to describe what you are doing. "That hurt my arm. I feel sad when you hit me. I don't want to be near you when you hit me." or "We do

not throw our toys. I am putting your toys up here so they can be safe, and so we can be safe, too."

It's ok for your child to experience the natural, negative consequences of the choices she makes. Additionally, it's important to offer positive reinforcement for the choices that work for her and the greater good as well. Offer this positive reinforcement at a much higher ratio. Use consistent eye contact and physical touch to reinforce this genuine praise. Use descriptive language. Even if she cannot understand everything you say, she will feel the energy and love in your words.

You can say, "You gave him some of your food. Look at his face. He feels happy," or, "You helped me put the toys in the basket. The room is organized now so we are ready to have more fun." Children won't remember how clean the kitchen floor was or what kind of car you drove them around in. They will remember the brightness of your smile, your open, expansive eyes, and your warmth as you loved and guided them.

3. Be proactive. Setting your special needs child up for success on a daily basis is critical. Consider physical, social, and emotional elements that will need to be addressed in any situation. At home, this will mean having the food, support, and activities you need for the day in place. When you are out and about, it means bringing what you will need to ensure your child has whole foods available and anything you need for entertainment. Your ability to think through situations ahead of time will help you to be more centered and calm as well. Your threshold for handling stressors will be higher when you are well-prepared, which means you will be more likely to respond in an effective way. You will feel more centered and enjoy parenting more. Watch The Choice Chart, Part 4 to learn about the importance of staying centered in the thick of parenting. Also, check out our e-book, How to Center.

4. Make photo routine charts. These are great for all children, and especially for those with special needs. Photo routine charts can be made for any part of your day that can benefit from regular structure. A morning routine chart might include eating breakfast, clearing your plate, making your bed, getting dressed, brushing hair, brushing teeth, putting on shoes, getting a backpack, getting into the car, and similar activities. Take a photo of your child doing each of these things with a big smile. Print the pictures and affix them with a gluestick onto a long piece of construction paper you have made by gluing the smaller pieces together. Write a descriptive phrase underneath each photo, such as, "I brush my teeth." Use a clear, easy-to-read font so your child can read it, too. Laminate the routine chart at a local teacher store and post it on a wall in a location that makes sense for the routine.

Children love these charts because their pictures are on them and they can use them to stay on track. When friends and relatives come over, your child can show them the chart.

5. Make it visual. At Daychild.org, the two videos about Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies, Parts 1 and 2 have terrific behavior modification strategies that are wholly positive and highly visual. These work especially well for children with special needs because they tap into their non-verbal senses as well, creating strong memory traces for new behaviors.

These strategies are for targeting a specific behavior, as opposed to The Choice Chart, which is a comprehensive daily behavior management system. The behavior-specific modification strategies allow you to choose one behavior at a time to work on, which is very helpful. Modify the recommended Pre-Meeting and rewards in these videos as needed for your special needs child.

6. Use the Word Diet and Spock Parenting. The Choice Chart, Part 3 video describes how to “go on a word diet” and become “a Spock parent.” These helpful strategies teach you how to save your parental energy for the fun things you do with your child, rather than expending your energy while redirecting your child. Most parents talk way too much when they are disciplining their children. They also become overly emotional when “triggered,” which can lead to an unnecessary escalation of the situation.

When you become a Spock parent, on a word diet, you speak in a calm, unemotional voice that your child will come to recognize. It’s the voice that lets him know you are in control of yourself and that you are going to follow through with what you say. And, while redirecting your child, you only say things once. This saves your parental energy and makes your child feel more secure because he knows the outcome, rather than always having to wonder what you’re going to do “this time.”

7. Remember, a child’s behavior never lies. This is an important truth for all parents to remember when their child is making poor choices. Consider the underlying reason your child is doing what they are doing. What is their truth in this moment? Are they hungry or tired? Are they wanting your undivided attention? Are they upset about something? If you can identify and help with the underlying issue, then you can address the behavior itself in a more effective way.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs reminds us that we cannot grow intellectually or spiritually until our basic physical and emotional needs are met. This is especially true for children because they are more in tune with their senses than most adults. Monitor and provide for your child’s basic needs with great care and planning so that he can be the most ready for every opportunity for higher learning that he can be.

8. Be realistic and help your child do things. When you ask your child to do something, be prepared to help him do it. You can say, “Please bring your dish to the sink,” as you help him put the silverware on top of the plate and guide him to the sink. He will be more likely to engage in your requests if you show an active willingness to physically support him while he’s completing the task.

Clean the playroom with him. Help him make the bed. Help him wipe down the sink after brushing his teeth. After, you can say, "The sink looks great and is ready for you to brush your teeth next time. Thank you." or "Your backpack is ready to go. You have all of things you need and now you're ready to have fun." The energy you put forth in a proactive will help him eventually say, "I want to do it by myself."

There's a delicate balance here, especially with special needs children.

Confidence comes from competence, not from unwarranted verbal praise or inflated compliments. When children face difficult things and master them, they gain a confidence and worthiness that no one can take away from them—because it's theirs, and they know it.

It's critical to provide the minimal scaffolding needed as your child faces emotional challenges or tasks that seem difficult. Ask him, "What can you do about that?" Let him dig deeper within to come up with strategies and solutions so he can own his successes and develop the quiet confidence that naturally follows.

9. Keep labels and diagnoses in check. It is incredibly important to learn everything you can about your child's diagnoses and the wide variety of ways it can show up for people who share it. The insights you can gain from internet forums and in-person learning can help you both guide and enjoy your child.

At the same time, it's important to remember that some of the most important things in everyone's life, are things we all want. And we want these experiences regardless of the physical, intellectual, or emotional limitations we have (and we all have limitations).

We all want to give and receive love and serve some purpose in the world. When you maintain a 30,000 foot view of your child as a human being, you stay in touch with the fact that she wants to experience the same things in life as everyone else, even if it may look a bit differently for her.

More important than any labels that can be used to describe your child, are her unique qualities that can be celebrated. Notice what makes her tick, when she feels most alive, and how you would describe her if she had no diagnosis. Start there whenever you are thinking about her. That's the true essence of who she is and where she will come to know the most joy.

10. Schedule respite care. Whether you qualify for government-provided respite care or not, schedule it regularly. Make a list of people who love you. Consider who might have



an hour or two to spare each week or month to be with your special needs child and your other children if you have more. Call these people and ask them if they would be willing to come over on a schedule that works for them so that you can catch a break. Whether you go to the grocery store, accomplish a pressing task, spend time with a friend, or just take a long walk so you can be alone, this type of self-care is incredibly important. Don't put it off. Make the calls.