

Preventing Challenging Behaviors

Behavior should not be a dirty word. Behavior is anything an organism does in response to action or stimulation. Behavior is a function of living for all of us. Good behavior does not get a lot of attention because it does not cause problems. However, when behavior causes a problem, it is labeled as bad or challenging and there is a lot of attention focused on how to fix it.

Behavior is often a means of communication. For example, when a child cries after being told that it is time to clean up her toys, she is communicating that she does not want to stop playing yet. When you see unwanted behavior occurring, approach it with a sense of curiosity and ask the questions: what is really going on here? What is my child trying to tell me? This approach helps by taking you from frustration to problem solving. You are looking at the why, rather than the what, in behavior.

Children with PWS respond exceptionally well to structure and routines. Create a routine for your family, not just your child with PWS. Your child may respond well to a visual schedule as well. Structure allows your child to know what to expect and feel safe. Build some time into your routine every day to spend some individual 1:1 time with your child doing something that is important to them. The amount of time spent doing this is not as important as your full engagement and attention. When possible, schedule this time together immediately following a less preferred activity. This accomplishes two things; it gives your child something to look forward to and it is an immediate reward for completing a task that may be challenging for them, or just one that they do not enjoy. From time to time, the routine may have to change for one reason or another. It is crucial that you preset your child when this occurs. How early to inform your child varies from child to child. For some children, too much notice of a change will increase their anxiety and cause upset. For others, the more notice and involvement in the decision the better. You know your child best.

In addition to developing structure and routine, it is important to develop appropriate expectations for your child. The expectations for rules should be consistent and your child should know what they are. Enforcing these consistently will provide your child with a sense of security like the routine and structure of the day. Developing household rules rather than rules that only apply to your child with PWS are more effective. Many children with PWS have a strong sense of fairness and will perceive rules that only apply to them as being unfair. If the rules for your other children are different, make sure everyone in the family knows what they are and why. For example, Jonny's bedtime is 7:30 but Jane's bedtime is 8pm because Jane is older. When Jonny is older, his bedtime will be 8pm.

Know how you are going to react and be consistent in your reaction when your child does not follow the rules or meet your expectations, which will happen. If yes means yes and no sometimes means yes, especially if they keep asking, your child is not going to know what to expect. They will learn that if they keep asking you will give in. Be consistent with your expectations and your responses. Respond with firmness, validate their feelings, and provide choices whenever possible.

One of the most successful, yet underused strategies for preventing challenging behaviors is to praise your child often and sincerely. Using a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions is ideal. Reinforce steps in the right direction and be specific. For example, “you did a great job putting your toys in the toy box, thank you” or “walking up the hill is really hard for you and today you walked halfway all by yourself – that was great, I’m so proud of you”. Use your attention and time to reward your child’s positive behavior. Praising your child not only helps to reinforce what you would like to see, it reminds you as the parent of all the wonderful attributes your child has, and the attributes certainly outweigh the challenges.

All children have challenging moments and not all behavior is related to PWS. When your child is in full melt-down mode, your reaction and response is important. After making sure everyone is safe, remain emotionally neutral and let it play itself out. Do your best to look disinterested and engaged in something else, while ensuring that they remain safe. STAY CALM. This is not the time to talk to your child or try to pull them out of the emotional state they are in. When in a full meltdown, they are unable to process any information you are giving them and talking is likely to escalate the situation. Some children may tear up books, cry, throw themselves on the floor and then fall asleep. Others may want hugs and apologize after the tantrum, do not deny them. Validate your child’s feelings NOT the behavior. Do not give in to the tantrum, if you do your child will learn that tantrums are the way to get what they want.

Once your child calms, have them clean up any mess that they made. Natural consequences are most effective; your child threw their toy and it broke; they no longer have that toy to play with. Punishments are rarely effective as many children with PWS have difficulty connecting two events as cause and effect.

If you are struggling to manage your child’s behavior, please call (800) 926-4797 or email support@pwsausa.org to speak with a Family Support Counselor. You are not alone; we are here to help.

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