



Laying Good Foundations in Early Childhood Behavior

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Trained and licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist, I know that children thrive on routine and structure. Now as the parent of a child with Prader-Willi Syndrome, I know that children with PWS absolutely benefit from routine and structure because knowing what to expect helps reduce anxiety. While we always respond to an immediate need, we have always held close to routines for feeding (in infancy), naps, meals and snacks, cleaning up toys after playing, setting and clearing the table, manners, getting dressed in the morning, getting ready for bed, etc. These routines then become incorporated into a way of living.

While many families experience "The Terrible Twos" we did not. Instead we experienced "The Horrible Threes!" Fortunately, I had a couple of girlfriends with typically developing kids who also sailed through their 2s only to hit the full-on tantrum wall at age 3. This was important for me so that I knew my child's behavior was not solely attributed to the behavioral symptoms associated with the syndrome. I was reminded that tantrum behavior is normal childhood behavior – it is the child's expression of independence and control. It is the parent's job to teach the child *how* to be age-appropriately independent in socially acceptable ways. Teaching kids limits reduces their overall anxiety and ultimately improves behavior.

Most kids and adults with PWS have much greater difficulty managing their emotions, especially feeling frustrated. I believe that their tenuous hold on their emotions is caused by their underlying biochemistry, and because of their biochemistry they are more prone to emotional or behavioral problems when they perceive *any* frustration. The emotional system takes over and completely supersedes the cognitive-thinking system, therefore our job as parents and care providers is to help our children, from as early as possible, fight against their underlying biochemistry to stay in the cognitive-thinking mode, helping them learn to gain better control over their emotions and behave more appropriately.

Tantrums in early childhood are not only unavoidable they are opportunities to teach appropriate social behavior and life lessons. If given the choice, no one *really* wants to share our toys! Generally speaking, expecting kids under age 2 to share is probably an unrealistic expectation. After age 2, as they are learning to share, it is helpful to matter-of-factly state what behavior is expected. "It's now time to share your toy with your friend for a minute, then she will give it back and share with you. If you are not able to share, you will not be able to play with this toy now." If/when the child goes into tantrum behavior, the parent can respond by calmly empathizing with the child, "You want to play with that toy. You don't want to share. Sharing is very hard." Then continue with a calm, firm voice, "And it is now time to share." If the child is not able to share - and she probably will not be - calmly follow through and let the child know she has lost the privilege to play with the toy now. When Cameron was first learning to share, I would simply hold him on my lap as he cried, maybe leave the room we'd been playing in in order to reduce the visual reminder of his loss, and softly say a couple of times, "I know you are sad and mad." After he calmed down, we would continue on as if nothing happened. The next time we attempted to practice sharing, I would respond with *huge* praise at the first *hint* toward sharing behavior.

Once a child is overcome by emotion and is in the middle of a tantrum, it is pretty much impossible to "get the child out of it" - the tantrum must simply be waited out until the child has moved from the feeling state back into the cognitive (thinking) state. During this feeling state, my experience is that the child does not have the *ability* to think clearly; they are completely immersed in the feeling state. Later on, the whole trick is to keep the child in the cognitive state and *avoid* the tantrum or meltdown from the beginning as often as possible.

Giving verbal information to the child as to what to expect next can be helpful, as well as giving the child extra time to process that information and come to accept it or, at a later age, negotiate it. Watch the child for cues as to any anxiety and respond immediately. For example, in the store before returning to the car tell the child "Ooops, Daddy forgot something in the car. [pause and look for anxiety]. He needs to go to the car and get it. We will wait here until he comes back. I think we can sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" three times before he comes back. [long pause]." At the first sign of anxiety (facial change, etc.) or protest, calmly empathize with and reassure the child; "I can see that you are sad or scared. [pause] You do not want Daddy to leave. [pause]" If the child feels understood, this can help her feel calmer and better able to stay in the thinking mode. She is now more likely to hear what is being said. Reinforcing calm behavior might sound something like, "After he goes to the car we will be so proud of

you for staying calm that you will be able to pick out a book from the store!” Placing everything in the "positive" can help reduce the illusion of frustration.

If the child does tantrum - and he probably will until he's somewhat older, has learned that tantrum behavior does not get him what he wants, and has practiced staying calm and getting more of what he wants *because* he remained calm - the parent's job is to *always* stay calm (a very difficult task in the middle of a store when feeling embarrassed!) and NEVER give in to the tantrum behavior. If a parent gives the child what the child is tantruming for, the child quickly learns that the tantrum technique works, and he will only increase the tantrum behavior next time. *It is extremely difficult to change tantrum manipulating behavior once it is established.*

I do not believe that “spanking” or hitting of any kind is an appropriate form of discipline for children in general and particularly not helpful with children with PWS. Instead I suggest that parents clearly express their expectations of the child, develop natural and contrived consequences, use praise, positive reinforcers, withdrawal of privileges, and infrequently (maybe in response to a child’s yelling or pushing), a time-out in the bedroom until the child gains control over his body. Timeouts should not be used as a form of punishment nor as a means for the child to think about the error of his ways. Timeouts should be used as an opportunity to remove the child from the situation so that he can better calm himself and gain control over his body.

Using contrived and natural consequences teach the child self control and problem solving skills. An example of a contrived consequence might be, “Don’t throw your toy. If you throw the toy, you will not be able to play with it for ten minutes.” If the child throws the toy, the immediate response is to calmly remove the toy from the child and calmly remind the child, “I told you not to throw the toy. You threw the toy. You have lost the privilege to play with it for ten minutes.” An example of a natural consequence might be, “Please put on your jacket. If you don’t wear a jacket, you will be cold.” In both cases, the child will experience the consequences to his choice of behaviors. (It should be noted that many children with PWS have a higher pain threshold and/or an irregular temperature regulation system and therefore may not experience the discomfort of cold as might be expected.) I believe the behavior modification and management techniques can be successful regardless of the child's mental acuity.

I want to emphasize that most children, but *particularly* children with Prader-Willi Syndrome, respond *extraordinarily* well to praise. Use genuine praise and genuine enthusiasm as often as possible.

I absolutely love and highly recommend the book, "The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children" written by Ross W. Greene, Ph.D. This book teaches parents how to help their kids better manage their feelings and behavior.

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