

Practice As A Management Tool For Unsafe, Disrespectful Behavior

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Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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Let's practice making safer choices!

When children say or do things that are hurtful, rude, destructive, or potentially dangerous, parents and teachers can find themselves trying to manage this behavior by explaining, scolding, discussing, and using rewards and punishments. Too often, these strategies make life unpleasant without solving the problem.

Practicing Kidpower skills can be a positive and effective management tool for addressing emotionally or physically unsafe behavior. Kidpower's Successful Practice Method puts the focus on what you want the children to do in order to prevent a problem like this from happening again; does not take long; does not require that you believe one party or the other; and is not punitive.

Recently, a kindergarten teacher told me how she had used the Successful Practice Method in her classroom after a little boy had kicked another in the crotch. The teacher required the boys to practice saying in a big, loud voice while making a fence with their hands, "STOP! I DON'T LIKE THIS!" She then had both boys practice using their Walk Away Power to leave. They also practiced their Hands Down Power by first imagining that they felt like touching someone or something that they shouldn't or felt like hitting, and then by using their power to pull their arms to their sides and keep them there.

This teacher reported that, later, she noticed the boy who had gotten kicked begin to bother the boy who had kicked him. This time, instead of kicking, he made his fence and set his boundary. The other little boy, who had meant no harm, immediately stopped!

This teacher's story inspired a skill that we now call "Feet Down Power" as a technique to help a child remember NOT to kick. To practice Feet Down Power, imagine that you really feel like kicking someone. Instead of kicking, pretend that your feet are glued to the ground and use your power to keep them there or to move them only enough that you can walk away.

Here are some Kidpower tips for how to use the Successful Practice Method as an effective, respectful behavior management tool with children:

1) **Remember that children often want to do something that their adults think is a bad idea.** Young people don't know. They forget. They experiment with testing boundaries or with negative uses of their power. Our rules are not nearly as important to children as they are to us. Instead of seeing "bad" behavior as a failure for ourselves or our children, we can use these problems as opportunities for children to learn. The point of having them practice skills is not to punish them but to give them chances to show how they can use their skills to handle real-life situations.

2) **Set a good example by accepting and managing your upset feelings.** Whether your toddler just climbed high up a ladder or your teenager swore at her mother, getting upset about emotionally destructive or physically dangerous behavior is completely normal. Rather than trying to suppress your feelings of annoyance, sadness, shock, worry, frustration, or anger when your child does something upsetting, accept your right to have these feelings. And then, in order to deal with the problem safely and effectively, manage your feelings instead of letting them cause you to shut down, get frantic, or explode.

You can practice for yourself by imagining your child doing something dangerous or destructive and then getting centered. Take a deep breath. Feel where your hands and feet are. Straighten your back. Look at or imagine seeing something calming. Remember that you can choose to look at the problem behavior as a chance for everyone to strengthen relationships and learn important life skills.

3) **Don't lecture or argue.** Suppose that two kids are fighting and you didn't see it start. Avoid playing the judge and deciding whose story to believe. Instead, you can point out that they were both doing something unsafe – fighting – and that you want to see each of them practice how to make safe choices. Then, coach them to practice skills such as: using their awareness to notice that someone is getting upset; saying, "Please stop"; stopping when someone sets a reasonable boundary; walking away; using Hands Down Power and Mouth Closed Power; and getting help.

4) **Address resistance with creativity, compassion, and humor.** How many of us really *like* being told that you've done something wrong? Most of us hate it, and most kids feel the same way. Resistance can include:

- Saying, "I don't want to!" and protesting bitterly;
- Rolling eyes and sighing heavily;
- Making rude remarks and sarcastic jokes;
- Arguing or minimizing with comments like, "I said I'm sorry so why are you punishing me?" Or, "I already know, and this is a big waste of time!"

Rather than taking a young person's resistance personally or getting stuck trying to talk her or him into agreeing with you, you can calmly persist with compassion, creativity, and humor. You can communicate a message along the lines of, "I understand. However, no matter how this problem started, I felt that what happened was unsafe (unkind, against our values, etc.). I appreciate what you are saying, but you are more likely to remember if we practice."

Your goal is to make practicing interesting and even fun, rather than to “punish” the child. For a younger child, you could start with a demonstration with puppets or toys to show the problem behavior and then to show safer choices. You could let older children or teens “practice” using spice jars or other unlikely objects as characters to act out the problems themselves and to show different safe and unsafe options. You might act out the practice yourself first; then, have your child take a turn.

5. Find opportunities to turn problems into practices. People tell us they are using practice to address many kinds of unsafe behavior. For example, a parent with a toddler who was always running off told her child before going to the store, “It is not safe for you to leave my side when we go to the park or the store. Let’s practice staying together. If you don’t want me to hold onto you, then you need to show me how you can hold onto me.” They practiced, and, with some reminding, her toddler held onto her.

Sometimes, people worry that the language we teach children to use does not sound like what “real children” would normally say. As adults, our job is to teach children how to behave in ways that often don’t come naturally to them so that they can stay safe, have positive relationships, and get the most out of their lives. We encourage children to try using our language and then to find words that work for them as long as these are both clear and respectful.

Here are a few examples of practices that can help address problem behaviors.

Problem: Two preschoolers are playing doctor too intimately.

Practice 1: Both children show how to doctor without taking off clothes or touching private areas.

Practice 2: Each child says, “Stop! That’s not safe!”

Practice 3: Each child uses Hands Down Power to stop.

Problem: Two children are roughhousing in a way that was fun at first but then got overwhelming for one of them. One is crying, and the other is calling him a “crybaby”.

Practice 1: Each child says, “Stop that game! I don’t feel comfortable. Let’s play something else.”

Practice 2: Each child pretends to want to keep roughhousing, but uses Hands Down Power, Feet Down Power, and Mouth Closed Power.

Practice 3: Each child uses the Trash Can to throw away the word “crybaby”. Each child practices saying out loud, “My feelings are important.”

Problem: Two teens are shouting insults at each other.

Practice 1: Each shows ways to “dispose of” insults without attacking the other person instead of taking the insults inside.

Practice 2: Each pretends to feel upset and demonstrates Getting Centered and Using Walk Away Power with a peaceful, aware, and confident attitude.

Practice 3: Each demonstrates Feeling One Way and Acting Another.

Sometimes, more complex social dynamics have developed that require separating the children for different kinds of practices. Suppose one child is constantly being left out of games, conversations, and other activities by the other children. Unfortunately, this child whines a lot, wants to get her way all the time, and makes putdown remarks about other children, which is why they say it’s not fun to play with her.

Practices for the child being left out: Speaking in a regular voice rather than whining. Using Mouth Closed Power instead of making putdown remarks. Waiting your turn. Asking in a cheerful voice, “Excuse me. Can I play.” Apologizing and persisting in the face of rejection by saying with a cheerful, assertive attitude, “I know

I've sometimes been impatient and rude. I'm sorry. I'm working on changing. I'd really like to play!" Getting help using a regular voice and being specific about what happened without being attacking or insulting.

Practices for the other children in being inclusive while taking care of themselves: Giving people another chance even when you don't feel like it by saying 'yes' together with a boundary, such as, "Yes, but no hitting." Stopping people without attacking them when they say or do something that is rude. Saying, "That was a rude thing to say. Please stop!" Saying, "Excuse me! It's MY turn now." Saying, "Please use a regular voice." When things get stuck, getting help using a regular voice, and being specific about what happened without being attacking or insulting.

In addition to addressing behavior problems, the Successful Practice Method can be helpful for many other potential challenges: meeting new people when you go to a new place; recovering from a mistake when you are playing a sport without feeling bad about yourself or blaming someone else; asking someone to dance at a party; preparing for an important interview; etc. The steps are:

- Define the problem or challenge in objective terms, without judging others' character or intent;
- Identify, very specifically and realistically, what you want to see happen; and then,
- Rehearse the behavior necessary to make the outcome you want possible, with coaching in how to do this effectively.

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Need ideas for what to practice? Our \$10 [Safety Comics](#) for younger children, older children, and teens provide tools for creating a common language about safety, including social stories using skills that can be acted out.