

PLANNED IGNORING AS AN INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION AND PRACTICE

IS THIS SCENARIO FAMILIAR?

After Carol has put two-year-old Josh in bed, given him Pooh bear and a blanket, kissed him goodnight again, and turned off the light to leave the room, Josh begins crying hysterically. Carol thinks, "It's time for Josh and the rest of the family to sleep. What can I do?"

If you have children, or work with children, you have probably witnessed behavior similar to Josh's. Confronting inappropriate behaviors as a parent can be challenging. A child will misbehave for a number of reasons. Sometimes behaviors are aimed at getting the attention of parents or others and are called attention-getting behaviors.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Planned ignoring is an intervention strategy that has been effectively used to reduce inappropriate behaviors. Planned ignoring occurs when an adult ignores minor irritants or silliness in a child. It also requires the adult to determine which behaviors will stop on their own and which behaviors need intervention, such as damage to property, physical harm to self or others, or behavior that is morally or ethically wrong.

Rutherford and Nelson suggest that a key factor in using planned ignoring is combining it with positive reinforcement for appropriate and desired responses or behaviors. Positive reinforcement is defined as the presentation of a reinforcer that increases the behavior (i.e., a smile by a parent after a child stands for the first time). Planned ignoring also works best as a one-on-one intervention.

Carol implements planned ignoring in response to Josh's crying at bedtime. She continues her journey out of the room and ignores Josh's crying while ensuring his safety through an inconspicuous crack in the door. The next morning as she goes into his room to begin the day, she praises Josh for his bravery at bedtime.

THE CHALLENGE OF USING PLANNED IGNORING

Responding positively to inappropriate or disruptive behaviors can be challenging for parents, teachers, and other adults. A child will misbehave for a number of reasons, such as to gain the attention of an adult or a peer or to escape an unwanted situation. The special

education literature often refers to these reasons as the function of the behavior. For example, a parent could ask, "Why does Joey cry and point to the ice cream? What purpose does the behavior serve?"

After correctly identifying the cause or function of an inappropriate behavior, it is important for the parent to evaluate and select an appropriate intervention plan. Interventions are most effective when the advantages and disadvantages are considered in relation to the child's need, the caregiver's (parent, teacher) ability to implement and follow through consistently, and family resources.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Most parents agree that children do lots of things (including some that are inappropriate) just to get attention. If ignored, children will stop many of these behaviors. Parents and other family members must choose which of these behaviors are sufficiently bothersome or inappropriate to target for change. They must then make sure that ignoring the behavior will not be dangerous or unsafe for the child or the family. Finally, they must determine whether they can tolerate a short increase in the behavior following the introduction of the intervention and can persist for a predetermined time to determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

Implementing a planned ignoring intervention requires little material, money, or intensive training. Peers, parents, teachers, and other adults can be taught to implement the procedure easily and effectively. Planned ignoring can be easily embedded in natural routines and activities once the behavior is identified. Here are some specific guidelines.

Identify the behavior

For the intervention to be most effective, everyone—parents, family members, teachers, child care providers—must agree which behavior to target and what it looks like. If Mohammed's parents want to decrease the number of times Mohammed uses inappropriate language, they must specify to adults and peers in his environment which words they consider inappropriate. Once the behavior to be ignored has been specifically identified and everyone has agreed to respond by ignoring the behavior, the intervention may begin.

Identify the conditions

Parents or other people who are implementing planned ignoring should be very specific about what behavior is acceptable in what conditions.

Tameika's mom works at home. She has told Tameika

and her brother, Jameel, not to disturb her when she is at her desk working except in emergencies. These conditions were stated simply and no lengthy explanation was given—everyone in the family knows the rules. If Tameika or Jameel forget and pester their mom, she ignores them. When she finishes her work, she thanks her children for respecting her work time and is available for a game or a walk.

Set them up for success

A child who is hungry, tired, or anxious may not make wise choices. A toddler may be more likely to ask for candy and tantrum if she does not get it at 5 o'clock before dinner than at 2 o'clock after lunch. A second grader may hit his brother in the car after a particularly long and tiring day at camp. Parents also have stressful days at home or when they work away from home. Most often, parents understand these circumstances and typically make allowances for them.

But sometimes, life gets the upper hand. Opportunities to plan and carefully allocate time for dinner, homework, and family may be compromised when a deadline has to be met at work or a family member becomes ill. During these stressful times, families often realize that the only consistent attention they give a child is to correct him or her for negative behaviors. Remember, children will work for attention even if it is negative if that is all they can get. So, planned ignoring works best if the child's physical, social, and emotional needs are met in positive ways.

Pair planned ignoring with positive praise

Planned ignoring works best when parents and family members respond to or praise another behavior.

Jesse and her mom are in a constant battle over slamming the car door. Mom picks up Jesse after volleyball practice and talks with her about her day at school and at volleyball. This semester, Jesse's grades are not what they should be, given her abilities. Often these discussions end with Jesse slamming the door of the car when her mom pulls into the driveway of their home. Most often she is angry with her mom. Karen, her mom, decides to ignore the slamming door and reinforce another behavior: "Jesse, thanks for helping Zachary with his backpack." Karen can choose to respond to the slamming door or to ignore it and reinforce another behavior.

Sometimes parents have little impact on a behavior, especially with teenagers or young adolescents.

Teresa, Lindsey's mom, noticed that suddenly Lindsey was not interested in hanging out with her friends after school. She did not seem to want to leave the house and seemed somewhat sullen, not her normal sunny disposition.

Teresa became anxious about her daughter and planned to chat with Lindsey's junior high counselor the following Monday, but on Friday something happened that gave some insight into Lindsey's behavior. A fellow student, David, called and asked whether Lindsey could help him with a history project. While on the phone, Lindsey was her old self—happy and exuberant. Teresa began to wonder whether Lindsey was staying home to wait for a telephone call.

Could Teresa have prevented the call or made David call? Probably not. Planned ignoring works only if parents, teachers, and family members know what the reinforcers are for behavior and have some opportunity to change the reinforcers. Teresa could have ignored Lindsey's behavior. It probably would not have made any difference because it was David's behavior, not Teresa's, that was motivating Lindsey's stay-at-home behavior. Parents must be observant, know their children and what is reinforcing to them, and be patient in intervening.

Be patient

One of the most difficult consequences of planned ignoring is that the behavior may increase for a brief time after the intervention begins. Parents must be patient and wait it out. Some parents give up: “It just didn’t work.” But successful parents, teachers, and family members keep calm, count to 100 if necessary, and wait for the appropriate behavior to occur.

In addition, planned ignoring usually does not have an immediate effect on the behavior. For this reason, planned ignoring will not be the answer for some behaviors. If the behavior poses an immediate threat or danger for the child, planned ignoring is not the answer. For example, ignoring a child’s running across a busy street or a crowded parking lot would not be wise. Therefore, think about the behavior and the consequence of ignoring. If no negative results would follow, try it.

Consider the context of the behavior

Parents and family members must consider the context of the behavior (i.e., how often the behavior has worked for the child and for what length of time). For example, if Maria has always given in when Jose tantrums for candy at the grocery check-out counter, it may take a little longer to see a change in Jose’s tantrums. The pattern is well established and has been reinforced consistently in the past: “If I tantrum then I get candy.” At the same time, immediate changes as a result of planned ignoring may also be difficult to see if Jose receives candy intermittently as the result of a tantrum. An intermittent schedule of reinforcement does not occur on a consistent basis; it follows some, but not all, of the behavior. An example follows.

Son Lee gives in to Chen’s tantrums when the store is busy on the weekend but stands firm during weekday mornings. Therefore, Chen does not recognize these contingencies (busy or not). But he does understand that the tantrums sometimes do work, so he just cries a little louder and kicks harder. He works extra hard to test when his tantrums are effective, that is, get him candy.

Following through and being consistent during these times is difficult. No parents like to be the target of staring and nervous giggles when their child misbehaves in public. Try to ignore your embarrassment and discomfort and continue to ignore the behavior. Teaching your child the limits and boundaries for appropriate behavior is worth the momentary social discomfort. Your patience and perseverance will pay off in the end.

Remember—it’s their job

The role of a child is to grow into a competent,

intelligent, and autonomous decision maker. This growth requires him or her to constantly test the limits and boundaries in relationships with peers, parents, family members, and other adults. The role of parents and other adults is to provide consistent and appropriate boundaries and limits; to express these limits clearly; and to enforce them consistently.

These boundaries broaden as children become adolescents and adolescents become young adults. But the boundaries continue to be important if children and adults are to understand how to behave in groups—families, schools, and society—and independently as autonomous decision makers.

As Jane walks into the kitchen for breakfast, Robyn, her stepmother, reminds her to return to her room make her bed before she sits down. Jane begins to mutter sarcastic, self-pitying remarks: “Why do I always have to do to everything? Sarah’s mother has someone to help her family and make her bed because her parents work.”

Robyn keeps her composure, ignores her stepdaughter’s dramatic body actions and comments, then praises Jane for her independence and helpful contributions with the family’s chores when she completes her task. She has reminded Jane of the family rules for functioning in their household (everyone does his or her job), ignored the inappropriate behavior, reinforced the appropriate behavior, and allowed Jane’s understanding of the potential differences in family structure and resources between her family and Sarah’s to grow.

Researchers tell us that a short burst of behavior will occur immediately when the behavior is first ignored. Just keep at it. Do not give up. This increase in behavior is short-lived and will diminish. Parents may also want to plan another behavior to use to reinforce planned ignoring. For example, some parents vacuum the floor, listen to music with headphones, or stand in the shower when ignoring screaming or tantruming toddlers. Other parents find other activities to help them ignore the inappropriate behavior of their children. Again, these behaviors must be considered only when children are in a safe and reasonable environment and do not require adult supervision or attention.

Planned ignoring can be a successful intervention for tantrums or other aggressive reactions to frustration. However, it must be delivered consistently. Many parents have said, “I tried ignoring the tantrum, but it did not work.” Most often the problem was in the duration of the intervention. Planned ignoring has a long-lasting effect, but it does not happen overnight. Adults must always and completely ignore the behavior in all situations. For example, the tantrum should be treated as if it does not exist—no positive or negative attention, no talking or correcting the child, and no hugs or spankings. If the tantrum is not completely ignored, then the child

will realize that for the tantrum to work, it must be loud and long before he or she can get what he or she wants.

In addition, it helps if everyone is on board. Everyone who has contact with the child needs to be aware of the intervention plan (who, what, when) so that it is enforced in the home, at school, and in community environments rather than just a single setting or with a single adult. When the behavior stops, wait a few moments and then deliver reinforcement or praise for the next appropriate behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Planned ignoring provides an opportunity for parents and family members to successfully intervene in the behavior of their child and to demonstrate self-efficacy in their own lives. It is a powerful intervention technique with lasting effects on child behavior. The advantages of a planned ignoring intervention plan are many:

- Little preparation time is needed for implementation.
- It is effective with a wide variety of behaviors.
- Proper implementation leads to success and lasting effectiveness.
- It is a less intrusive method for reducing inappropriate behaviors.
- It gives an opportunity for the child to self-reflect and independently correct behavior.
- It gives adults an opportunity to build a more respectful, caring relationship with the child.

Disadvantages have also been identified:

- It is ineffective if the behavior is not properly identified.
- It is ineffective if the reinforcer cannot be controlled.
- The rate (how often) or intensity (how much) of behavior may temporarily increase.
- The effect on the behavior may be delayed.
- Adults may experience social discomfort when they are implementing it.

Seeing the results of a successful behavior-change program may take some time. Keep in mind that the behavior may even get worse before it gets better. Practice planned ignoring for at least one month before evaluating its effectiveness or giving up.

Remember, inappropriate behaviors that a child has used for a long time will be more difficult to correct and take more time to overcome. If you start to feel discouraged with the strategy, talk with people who understand what

you are trying to accomplish. A friend, a family member, or a professional who works supportively with you can help keep you on the right path.

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