

# UNIVERSAL PREVENTATIVE PRACTICES FOR USE IN THE HOME FOR CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

## INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION AND PRACTICE

### WHAT ARE UNIVERSAL PREVENTION PRACTICES?

*Universal preventative practice* is a method for addressing problem behavior in a child. It is an approach applied to an environment, such as the home, to proactively avoid problem behaviors while supporting the child's development and use of appropriate behavior. Universal preventative practices have been successfully applied across the nation in our schools and is typically associated with a Positive Behavior and Intervention Support (PBIS) Model.

Universal preventative practice is the first line of defense in addressing problem behaviors displayed by children. When implemented in the schools, it typically has effectively decreased the number of office referrals due to problem behaviors, improved the academic and social climates of the school, and created more positive learning environments for both students and teachers.

A family's main goal when using universal preventative practices in the home is to help their child use appropriate behavior. Facilitating his or her success requires the family's willingness to *encourage, teach, re-teach, and reinforce* appropriate behaviors within the structure of the home environment. In addition, the family is in charge of the focus of the universal preventative practice (which child, what behaviors), the goals (how much improvement is needed to demonstrate success), the means of achieving the goals (what, how, and when the family will implement), and the evaluation process (how the family will determine progress). The family uses its unique knowledge of the child to construct a homeward support system that promotes the continuing use of appropriate behaviors.

The three primary tenets of applying universal preventative practices in the home environment are the same as those in school:

- Reviewing routines and physical arrangements
- Defining and teaching expectations

- Planning systematic responses to both appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

### ROUTINES AND PHYSICAL ARRANGEMENTS

The first step toward implementing universal preventative practices in the home is to critically review family routines and the physical arrangement of the home. This review should involve all family members, including the child who is displaying inappropriate behaviors. The involvement of all family members is important for the selected practice to be both systematic and consistently implemented and for the family to build consensus on how best to meet the child's needs.

As part of this review, the family may engage in discussions or individually write down the issues prior to the discussion. Regardless of the approach, the focus remains on what routines the family follows and how the family has arranged the physical layout of the home.

#### ROUTINES

A family may have neither the luxury nor the need to structure its home the way a school filled with children is. However, daily and weekly routines are important features that the family can manipulate and restructure to prevent rather than encourage the child's inappropriate behavior.

As they review their daily and weekly routines, family members are often surprised at how many events are woven into the day. For example, many family routines revolve around school-related activities, such as sports practice, theater schedules, club meetings, and around parental community-related activities, such as religious services, employment commitments, and community board meetings. These activities are typically not consistently scheduled and can make a family's Monday evening routine different from what they do on Tuesday. And sports events on the weekends can make the family's Saturday routine different from their activities on Sunday.

Some of the more consistent family events may include meals, homework, and bedtime and morning routines. When these events are held constant, the family will be less likely to observe the child engaging in inappropriate behaviors. Several aspects of these events can be held constant:

- **Times of the day** — Homework is completed before playing; the child is in bed by 8:30 p.m.

- **Family member who are present** — Both parents eat with the children Monday through Thursday evenings; sister does homework after swim practice; brother does homework first thing when he gets home from school before dinner.
- **How the routine is executed** — Grandma makes dinner, mom prompts children to the table, and sister and brother clear the table; sister prompts brother to brush his teeth and change into pajamas, grandma reads the child a story, and dad turns out the lights.
- **How displays of inappropriate behavior are addressed** — Dad ignores minor inappropriate behaviors such as whining, but mom punishes whining.

For example, Marcel's family dreaded the period of time after his homework was finished and but before dinner. His mother describes the ordeal:

*Getting Marcel to finish his homework has traditionally been a family nightmare. His father and I would spend a good hour with him pleading and bribing him to finish it but would often let him do what he wanted (play first) because his behavior was horrible. He would scream at us, saying how much he hated us and this family and how unfair it was that his sister did not have as much homework as him. He would rip his papers and throw them about the kitchen, he would run around the house crying, and sometimes he would hit us when we put him back in the chair. We were exhausted after this nightly routine and did not look forward to seeing papers in his backpack because we knew the struggle we would have. In addition, we spent so much time with Marcel that his younger sister's homework would sometimes go unfinished.*

*On the suggestion of a family friend who also has a child Marcel's age with behavior problems, our family watched Marcel for a few days to see what he liked playing with. We noticed that he almost always picked a video game in the den to play with. So we began telling Marcel that after he finished his homework, he could play with the video games, but only if he completed his homework. After a while this began to work for the homework, but now when we call him and his sister to the kitchen table for dinner, he sometimes refuses to come, often yelling "I'm not going back in there, my homework is finished!" His inappropriate behaviors again seem as bad as they were during homework.*

*Having the family eat together at dinner is very important to us, but Marcel's inappropriate behaviors are making it unpleasant. I typically do not*

*eat during dinner anymore because I am so busy getting Marcel to the table and getting him to stay at the table and my husband just does not have the energy to help."*

This example may be similar to one that you are experiencing in your home. For Marcel and his family, it will be important to better organize the family's after-school routine (homework, play, and the beginning of dinner) as part of a universal preventative practice. This reorganization includes clearly stating the beginning and ending times for homework and dinner; holding the routine constant—play time earned for completing homework can be used only after dinner; and articulating the roles of others involved—mom, dad, and sister.

### **PHYSICAL ARRANGEMENTS**

Just as a family routine may actually promote the continuance of problematic behavior, so may the physical arrangement of the home. Physical arrangement for the home may include the following aspects:

- **Where the furniture is placed** — TV is in the kitchen by the homework table; plants block an adult's view of children outside.
- **Where specific family events occur** — The family eats dinner at the kitchen table or in front of the TV in the family room; children do homework in the bedroom or at the kitchen table; they take showers and brush their teeth in the upstairs bathroom or in the downstairs bathroom.
- **Where adults and children spend time** — Adults are in the living room and children are in the TV room.
- **How consistent these arrangements are** — Homework is sometimes completed at kitchen table and sometimes at the island counter; books are read either in the child's bed or on the couch in the TV room.

Often furniture placement creates barriers that prevent the family from facilitating appropriate child behaviors. For example, if the furniture arrangement compromises a parent's ability to supervise, it is likely that inappropriate behavior will go unobserved in the created blind spots.

Take Jessi's house, for example. Physical confrontations between Jessi and her brother often occur in front of the toy closet as the children select play a game and their parents read the paper in chairs on the other side of the room. The confrontations typically stop when either parent says, "We saw who started the fight and that person better stop right

now.” Jessi’s family could apply a universal preventative practice related to physical arrangement by placing the parents’ chairs so that they face the toy closet and removing any other barriers (e.g., plants, end tables) that block the parents’ line of sight.

When asked about the physical arrangements of Marcel’s home for the after-school routine, his mom provided the following:

*Because Marcel usually used the kitchen table to do his homework, it was difficult for his sister to set the table with all his carrying on. Once he did do his homework and began playing his video games before dinner, his sister could set the table. However, the battles to get him to the table for dinner were challenging because the TV room was in the basement. I was tired of running up and down the stairs. Plus when in the kitchen he would often mess up his table setting and then complain that his sister did not give him a fork or spoon. In addition, in his attempts to run back to the TV room, he sometimes knocked items off the kitchen counter, angering his father and me. Once he scraped his arm on the counter and had a bruise for a week.”*

Marcel’s family could use this information to adapt their homework and dinner routines and rearrange the environments in which these two routines occur. In terms of using universal preventative practices for the physical arrangement of the home, Marcel’s family may consider the following suggestions.

First, the location of the video games in the basement may be contributing to Marcel’s reluctance to return to the kitchen for dinner. Because he is in the basement and his mother and sister are in the kitchen, he is neither privy to the kitchen activity (e.g., “The roast will be done in 5 minutes”; “Dad just pulled up so we are ready to eat”) nor easily accessible to his mother, who is actively preparing the meal. Because there is a TV in the kitchen, moving the video game equipment to the kitchen TV may decrease the inappropriate behaviors Marcel uses during the transition from game playing to dinner. After dinner, he could move the equipment downstairs to the TV room.

If these solutions are neither possible nor agreeable, Marcel’s parents may decide that he must use his earned game time only after dinner. In addition, until Marcel can transition smoothly from one activity to the next, the family may want to move furniture and objects that he or other family members could hurt themselves on.

Simply revising family routines and moving furniture are not likely to yield the levels of appropriate behavior in which you want your child to engage. The child may not know how he or she is supposed to act. He or she may notice that the routine and the physical arrangement have been changed, but, in isolation, these changes are not enough.

## **DEFINING AND TEACHING EXPECTATIONS**

The next steps in implementing universal preventative practices are for the family to define the behavioral expectations of the child and then to teach the child these behavioral expectations.

### **DEFINING EXPECTATIONS**

Defining behavioral expectations simply means that the family determines what behaviors they want their child to display. Behavioral expectations are similar to house rules but should be *phrased in positive terms*. House rules are often a “List of Don’ts”: “don’t swear,” “don’t go into your sister’s bedroom,” “don’t take your brother’s things,” “don’t run in the house,” “don’t leave your stuff where it doesn’t belong,” “don’t go somewhere without telling us.” These “don’ts” do not promote appropriate behavior because it is unclear what you want your child to do.

Children can very clearly understand what they are not supposed to do, but without a clear understanding of what they should do instead, they often revert to the habitual problem behaviors. In addition, with so many rules, it is unlikely that the child will abide by all of them. Just like school rules, house rules should be kept to five or fewer. By keeping the number of house rules to a minimum, the family increases the likelihood that the child will follow them. Another problem with house rules is that some families constantly change them. These changes confuse the child—a child who does not know the rules is less likely to abide by them.

To better define behavioral expectations, the family should follow a simple 3-step process.

1. *Develop positively worded expectations.* This first step focuses the expectation on how the family wants the child to act. If the child is engaging in inappropriate behaviors, he or she knows what not to do and is probably less clear on what he or she should be doing. The family could rephrase the “List of Don’ts,” for example: “use respectful language,” “knock before entering someone else’s bedroom,” “ask permission before using someone else’s things,”

“walk in the hallways and on the stairs,” “when you finish with an item, put it back in its place,” “tell us where you are going before you go.”

2. *Select expectations that all family members agree on and are willing to enforce.* While rephrasing the house rules into positive terms, it is important that the family build consensus on what the overall house behavioral expectations are and what expectations the family will consistently reinforce. Unless all family members buy into the list of behavioral expectations, they will make little progress in changing the child’s behavior. During step 2, all family members should be given a voice in the decision making and each voice should be respected. Once the family agrees on a set of behavioral expectations, step 3 can begin.
3. *Combine expectations into three or four housewide rules.* Again keeping in mind the positive phrasing and the number of behavioral expectations, the family should create a maximum of three or four broad housewide rules that highlight all of the family’s expectations. A family may use the rephrased “List of Don’ts” to decide on the following three rules: 1) Respect others, 2) Respect house property, and 3) Respect yourself. If the child can understand and remember these three rules, then he or she should be able to apply them to any home routine. All smaller house rules can fall under one of these headings; when they are discussed, they can be anchored to the larger rule as a rationale.

Marcel’s family began the 3-step process by focusing on their overall behavioral goals for Marcel. Then they focused the discussion on the specific routines with which Marcel is experiencing difficulties. Overall, defined behavioral expectations should guide the child toward the expected behavior.

### **TEACHING EXPECTATIONS**

Once the family members have agreed on the housewide behavioral expectations, they are ready to communicate the expectations to the child. To do so, the family should incorporate multiple effective teaching ideas: teach rules in the environment in which you expect the child to use the appropriate behaviors and use effective instruction. Effective instruction simply means supplying a rationale for the rule, attaching it to one of the big rule anchors, demonstrating and explaining the rule, and then giving the child an opportunity to demonstrate

understanding. Effective instruction of behavioral expectations can be accomplished by following a few steps.

1. *Review the housewide behavioral expectations with the child and with the family members who will be implementing the universal preventative practices.* This review can be done through discussion and examples. For example, Marcel and his father, mother, and sister may sit down and discuss how the housewide rules were created and what they are.
2. *Demonstrate how using the housewide rules leads to the behavioral expectation.* For example, Marcel’s father may use the rule “Respect others” and provide verbal examples of what that may look like during Marcel’s after-school routine. “

*Your after-school routine is doing your homework at the kitchen table, then you can play video games at the kitchen TV until your mother tells you it is time for dinner. When you hear her say, “Marcel, it’s dinnertime, please turn the TV off,” you can show your respect for her by following her directions and turning off the TV. When you yell at her and refuse to turn the TV off, you are not following the housewide rule of “Respect others.”*

3. *Let the child practice the housewide rule and give feedback based on his or her performance.* To demonstrate the rule, the family can create role-playing scenarios in which each family member takes his or her role and each provides feedback on whether the rule and the consequent behavioral expectation was observed. It may also be helpful for the child to take on the role of another family member to see what it is like when the housewide rule is not followed. For example, Marcel may take on his mother’s role as she refuses to do what he asks.
4. *Praise and reinforce the correct use of the housewide rule and the behavioral expectation.* This praise and reinforcement should be provided each time the child displays the desired behavior. It can take many forms: oral (“Awesome!” “Great job!”), physical (hi-five, hug, pat on back, smile), and tangible (a family treat).
5. *Review the housewide rules and behavioral expectations specific to the routine being targeted.* For example, the child or another

family member could restate the rules and expectations. Marcel could state the rules, the routine he needs to use these rules in, and an example of using and not using each rule.

## **PLANNING SYSTEMATIC RESPONSES**

For some children, following the universal preventative practices of reviewing routines, assessing the physical arrangement, and defining and teaching behavioral expectations will be enough to decrease the likelihood of future displays of inappropriate behavior. However, some children will still display inappropriate behaviors. Therefore, some families will need to devise a plan for responding to both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors.

### **RESPONDING TO APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR**

When a child begins to display appropriate behaviors during traditionally difficult routines, it is easy to forget to reinforce them. Research in both schools and homes clearly states that children are more likely to continue using appropriate behaviors if they are reinforced by others. Over time, reinforcement does not need to occur each time the child engages in the appropriate behavior but should occur often enough to keep the child using the new behavior.

For example, Marcel's family may give him a lot of oral and tangible praise during the first few weeks he engages in the behavioral expectation. Over time, if his appropriate behavior continues, they may give consistent oral praise but taper the tangible praise.

*Thanks, Marcel, for following my direction to turn off the TV and come to dinner. It makes me happy to know that you respect me. Because you have been respecting me all week, I made your favorite for dinner – sloppy joes – hope you enjoy it.*

### **RESPONDING TO INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR**

It is unrealistic to think that a child will never display inappropriate behavior; however, having all family members prepared for it can make it easier to cope with. Sometimes children re-engage in prior inappropriate behaviors when we forget to reinforce them for abiding by the housewide rules and behavioral expectations, when we forget to consistently enforce the rules, or when the routine suddenly changes. If the inappropriate behavior returns, a family may view this as an opportunity to review the housewide rules and to re-teach the behavioral expectation while ignoring the inappropriate behaviors.

If Marcel were to stop “respecting others” during the after-school routine, his mother may restate the housewide rule, remind him of his ability to follow the rule and how that makes her feel, and then cue him to display the behavioral expectation.

*Marcel, during our after-school routine I would like you to follow our house-wide rule of “respect others.” You can show me this by following my direction to turn off the TV and come to the dinner table. You showed me respect all last week.*

## **SUMMARY**

Implementing universal preventative practices effectively increase the likelihood that your child will follow housewide rules and engage in the behavioral expectations you have set for him or her. Universal preventative practices offer families a way to re-organize and clarify what they want their children to do during typical family routines. When house-wide rules and behavioral expectations are taught, modeled, and reinforced, the child will know what is expected of him or her, when to engage in the appropriate behaviors, and what he or she will gain from the family for doing so. Overall, universal preventative practices provide a context for the child to repeatedly engage in family-sanctioned appropriate behaviors.

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**MARCEL**  
**Universal Preventative Practice Case Study**

<b>Process Step</b>	<b>Problem Behavior</b>	<b>Universal Preventative Practice Recommendation</b>
<b>Routine</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Marcel is sometimes allowed to play before homework if behaviors are out of control.</li> <li>*He refuses to begin his homework.</li> <li>*He refuses to stop playing video games and go to the kitchen for dinner.</li> <li>*He screams, destroys homework papers, cries, and runs around the house.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Family can clearly state timing of after-school routine.</li> <li>*Family can hold after-school routine constant (homework, video games, dinner).</li> <li>*Family can clearly articulate others roles during routine.</li> <li>*Family can determine that games earned for homework may be played after dinner.</li> </ul>
<b>Physical Arrangement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Video equipment is in the basement and the rest of the family is upstairs in the kitchen.</li> <li>*Marcel refuses to leave the basement TV room and come upstairs for dinner.</li> <li>*He knocks items over, hurts himself on furniture, and yells</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Family can move video game equipment to kitchen TV, and after dinner movie it to the TV room.</li> </ul>
<b>Defining Behavioral Expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Marcel does not follow parent directions during after-school routine.</li> <li>*Marcel is unclear what house rules are.</li> <li>*Marcel has house rules that are a “List of Don’ts.”</li> <li>*Refusals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Marcel needs to “respect others.”</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching Behavioral Expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Marcel does not know what the family behavioral expectations are.</li> <li>*Marcel does not know when, where, or how to implement housewide rules.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Review three housewide rules several times a day across multiple days.</li> <li>*Model “respect others” with an example of following directions of mom and dad.</li> <li>*Practice rule by using examples and non-examples through role plays.</li> <li>*Provide feedback for correct use of the rule.</li> <li>*Praise the use of the rule.</li> <li>*Review housewide rule and expectations.</li> </ul>
<b>Responding to Appropriate Behavior</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Marcel follows housewide rule.</li> <li>*Marcel displays behavioral expectation during routine.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Family offers consistent reinforcement for following housewide rule and displaying behavioral expectation.</li> <li>*All family members are responsible (mom and dad – oral, physical, and tangible praise; sister – verbal and physical praise).</li> </ul>
<b>Responding to Inappropriate Behavior</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Marcel engages in inappropriate behaviors (see routine – behavioral problems).</li> <li>*If Marcel acts up enough, he is allowed to play before doing homework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*All family members ignore inappropriate behaviors.</li> <li>*Apply natural consequences (if he refuses to turn off the TV and come to dinner, then dad disconnects the video equipment and Marcel does not eat dinner).</li> <li>*Review housewide rules.</li> <li>*Re-teach behavioral expectations.</li> <li>*Cue Marcel to abide by rules and expectations.</li> </ul>