



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Encouraging Good Behavior

Providing explanations for appropriate behavior helps children learn kind and respectful behavior. We recommend using specific types of explanations with children at different ages.

Kinds of explanations: Lucy Daniels Center distinguishes four important types of explanations for good behavior. Value-centered explanations emphasize the moral reasons for behavior. Pragmatic explanations emphasize the child's self-interest and the rewards that follow from good behavior. Empathic explanations focus upon the impact of behavior upon other people. Collaborative explanations emphasize the child's own wishes to behave. The story of Suzie illustrates these four possible explanations for why good behavior is important:

Five-year-old Suzie grabbed her friend Barbara's toy. Suzie insisted (incorrectly) that she had been playing with the toy first. An illustration of a value-centered explanation would be: "It is wrong to take something from Barbara. It is also wrong to make up a story about playing with the toy first." A pragmatic explanation might be: "You are making Barbara upset. She might not want to play with you if you keep her toy, and then you will be upset." An empathic explanation might be: "Barbara is upset. You know how badly it feels when someone takes something you are playing with, and you should not make Barbara feel that way." A collaborative explanation might be: "I know that you are disappointed with yourself when you take something from someone else and also make up a story. Please give it back so you can feel better about yourself."

Explanations by age

Age 6 months – 1 and 1/2 years: Parents should begin offering explanations for good behavior during a child's infancy. Children will slowly

grow into increased understanding. Parents can provide explanations such as: "Ow, that hurts," (a simple empathic explanation) or "Mommy does not like it when you hurt," (a simple pragmatic explanation). Parents can also offer value-centered explanations such as, "No, it is wrong to hit."

Age 1 1/2 - 3 years: Children between 1 1/2 and 3 years are particularly concerned with meeting their own needs. Therefore, pragmatic explanations, based on self-interest, are very useful during these years. Self-interest motivates people of all ages to act in kind and respectful ways, but hopefully self-interest does not become the most important motivation for good behavior.

Parents can provide strong support for the development of kind and respectful behavior by beginning to provide children with collaborative explanations. Even at this tender age, children have transformed their parents' basic expectations and values into an inside part of themselves through a process that psychoanalysts call "identification." Very young children are not always able to fully use these identifications to guide their behavior. But, even during misbehaving days, most of the choices that children make are appropriate and indicate their identification with their parents' expectations and ways of behaving. Because children have made these identifications, parents are able to reinforce their own wishes to behave.

Value-centered explanations should also be emphasized. Value-centered explanations are "because it is right" explanations. A common value centered explanation for a child of this age would be: "It is wrong to hurt people. Mommy and Daddy don't, and we expect you not to hurt anyone either."

Empathy-based explanations should also be expanded. An appropriate comment might be: "Did you see the look on Billy's face? He was really upset and scared when you hurt him, and we don't want to make others feel that way."

Age 3 years: Parents can continue to offer value and empathy-based explanations, reinforcing the basic teaching and expanding into more subtle areas. For example, the 3-year-old who has learned that hitting is wrong can now be taught that mean looks or words, although better than hitting, are still a way of hurting.

Although children may not acknowledge that they wish to behave, collaborative explanations begin to be especially helpful and understood around age 3, when children have made strong identifications with their parents and other trusted adults. Age 3 is also a good time for parents to begin to curtail pragmatic explanations. Reward programs for good behavior, which are based on the principle of pragmatism and self-interest, are reasonable if utilized very occasionally, but we don't want children to learn that their choices should be based solely on the gratification of their own wants and desires.

Age 4 and beyond: After age 4, we recommend that parents continue to increasingly bring collaborative explanations into a mix with value-centered and empathic explanations. Parents should provide these explanations, keeping in mind that, by the age of 4, children generally understand when they are misbehaving.

Giving children credit for what they know is an affirming way to guide them toward kind and respectful behavior. The most helpful approach is to acknowledge the child's understanding. For example, saying, "It is wrong to hurt, it is not right when you hurt Johnny and upset him. I know that you understand that and are also upset about your behavior," combines elements of value-centered, empathic, and collaborative explanations.

Parents guide children toward moral behavior that is, hopefully, primarily based on the child's wish to be like their beloved, moral parents, and on his or her concern for the welfare of other human beings. For that reason, as important as the explanations that parents provide are, parental understanding and empathy with children's reasons for behavior and parental examples are even more important. Parents primarily teach children to share, for example, not with explanations or instructions, but by sharing their own ice cream.

If parents keep in mind that their many interactions with their children about behavior are for the purpose of helping them choose behavior that is based on an inner caring, decency and ethicality, parents will be well poised to provide guidance through their own actions and words.