



Quietly Effective Techniques for Working with Toddlers and Preschoolers

The principles and techniques described below are ways of interacting with young children that can prevent many problems, and help resolve many others once they've gotten started. Anyone you've seen that is really effective with young children (can elicit their cooperation and is well liked by them) is likely using many of these ideas. Choose a couple to experiment with and consider putting them on your fridge.

- ❖ **Proximity:** Move toward the child when asking them to do something that you suspect they might ignore. I call this an *Off the Couch Intervention*—as much as we'd rather stay there, this pays off in the long run as our credibility with our kids increases.
- ❖ **Touch:** e.g. Hand on the child's shoulder, helps to engage the child's attention; conveys warmth.
- ❖ **Child's Level:** Being able to look horizontally in a child's eyes. Can be done in friendly or firm tone as needed.
- ❖ **"Look at Me, Please":** Getting the child to look at you before giving a direction increases the odds that your request will soak in. This can be especially important when kids are wound up.
- ❖ **Describe the Behavior You Want:** *"I'd appreciate you guys quieting down"* instead of *"Hey you guys, cut out the noise."* It is easier for kids to comply with what we ask them to do when we describe what we want them to do rather than tell them what not to do.
- ❖ **Brevity*:** Keep directions concise. Also keep talking to a minimum when things aren't going smoothly. As Jim Fay suggests, *Save the words for the happy times.*
- ❖ **Whispering:** Contrary to our expectations, kids often listen more closely when we whisper, especially if they are used to hearing us raise our voices often.
- ❖ **Away from Sing Song:** (for ages 1 and up, especially kids 2 and over). We sometimes talk to kids in a sing-songy voice, when often kids pay a lot closer attention to what we say to them when we speak in a similar tone that we would use with older kids.



- ❖ **Use Please and Thank You Liberally***: If you want children to speak respectfully to you, model this when you talk to them. Using polite language also makes it easier children to cooperate with us.
- ❖ **Praise Compliance***: When you ask a child to do something and she complies, thank her or point out that you appreciate her cooperation. This way you are paying attention to the positive behavior you want, making it more likely to occur.
- ❖ **Simple Distraction**: *“Hey look it’s your yellow truck.”* This is very useful after giving a command such as asking a child to leave the stereo alone.
- ❖ **Indirect Distraction**: You turn away from the child and play her xylophone like you’re really into it. She may come to see what all the excitement is about.
- ❖ **Substitution**: Your child is pounding on the cat with a rattle: *“You can pound on the carpet”*. The other response would be *“Here’s how you can touch the cat.”* The advantage of this technique is that it respects the child builds on what he was interested in doing.
- ❖ **When...Then**: *“When your toys are put away, I’ll read you a story.”* This technique uses contingency and helps by assuming the child will comply. This one is a biggie. Use it frequently.
- ❖ **Contingency Principle**: The principle behind When/Then statements. There is often something that kids don’t want to do. Fortunately at the same time, there is usually something they do want to do. Put the one they are less excited about first and the one they want second. *“You can have a cookie as soon as you’re done with your sandwich.”*
- ❖ **Assumption of Compliance**: Say *“Thank you”* in a friendly way after you ask a child to do something and walk away. It increases the odds that they’ll do it. Sometime this works even when they have refused to do what you ask.
- ❖ **Physical Guidance**: Gently moving the child away from the problem area. *“You can play over here”*. This is another *Off the Couch Intervention* that raises our credibility with kids.
- ❖ **Repetition**: for young kids: *“You can pound on the carpet.”* This is also known as broken record when used with older children and adults.



- ❖ **When a Child Won't Hand Something to You:** Ask, “*Would you like to hand that to me, or do you need me to come and get it from you?*” If the child doesn't hand it to you, resolutely move toward her and gently but firmly take the object from her. If you say anything, you might try saying, “*Bummer.*” This and the following technique simultaneously limits and shares control with the child.
- ❖ **When a Child Won't Come:** Ask the child, “*Would you like to come here on your own, or should I come and get you?*” If the child doesn't come, it is important to gently and firmly get them.
- ❖ **Big Girl Voice:** When your child demands something, like you work for him and he's not happy with your performance, (1) Say, “*Big Boy Voice*”, in an upbeat tone. 2) If he doesn't come up with a more polite way of asking, or if he says it in a whiney or demanding tone instead, model what you want him to say, “*Juice, please.*” (3) Give him what he ask for only after he's asked for it in a Big Boy Voice. It works because of consistency, but in public it can look like magic.
- ❖ **Attend to the Positive Half*:** If you ask your child to hang up her coat, and she does it, but is complaining as she does so just say thank you and allow her to protest as she complies. There's nothing wrong with protest. If you say thank you when she does this, you give attention to the positive behavior you want more of, and you are ignoring the behavior you'd like to see less of.

***Attention Principle**

This idea underlies many of the *Quietly Effective Techniques*. Remember that behaviors you pay attention to will tend to grow and that behaviors that you don't notice will tend to wither. Also keep in mind that negative attention such as yelling or lecturing is still attention, and in the long run will encourage the child to engage in the behavior more often. When kids are behaving at the dinner table we often make the mistake of not noticing their appropriate behavior. We often just think, “Finally some peace and quiet.” Then when the kids act up we start paying attention. “Why can't you two eat nicely?” The net effect of this is that the kids will act up more often at the dinner table because they're smart. They have learned that this is one sure way to get our attention.