

Grade 4 April Part 3

Problem behaviors—how to understand and change them

“It’s too bad Jimmy can’t read.”

“He never sits still.”

“His behavior disturbs everyone in the house.”

It’s obvious that this fourth grader has problems. But the descriptions of his problems are not very clear. Parents can learn to improve their ability to describe behavior—and thus learn to understand and deal with their child’s *real* problems.

Be positive

A good place to start is to describe behavior in positive rather than negative ways.

In the case of Jimmy’s reading problem, a reading test indicated that he *can* read—but at second grade level. It is more positive—and more accurate—to report that he reads at a second grade level than to say, negatively, “Jimmy can’t read.”

The real problem is that Jimmy’s textbooks were written for children with fourth grade reading skills. A first step toward a solution would be to give Jimmy some second grade reading material.

Be precise

When parents say, “He won’t sit still,” do they mean that Jimmy runs wildly around the house, or only that he wiggles his feet when he sits in a chair?

Correcting a problem behavior first requires a precise description of the specific behavior. (“Jimmy wiggles his feet about ten times every five minutes when seated at the dinner table.”) The problem must be identified in terms of what precisely the child does.

Be specific

To say, “His behavior disturbs everyone in the house,” is not a specific description.

We need to ask: What exactly does he do? (Perhaps he whistles too loudly on occasion.) Who is “everyone” that is disturbed? (Maybe Dad is the only person upset by this behavior.) Under what circumstances does the prob-

lem most often occur? (Perhaps when Dad is reading the newspaper after a hard day at work.)

Asking detailed questions that pinpoint specific characteristics is essential to understanding and then correcting problem behavior.

Be a good observer

Identify what happens immediately *before* (the antecedent) and immediately *after* (the consequence) the problem occurs. Changing the antecedents or the consequences can be a very effective way to alter a problem behavior.

For example, you may observe that it’s when Jimmy gets frustrated (the antecedent) that he whistles too loudly (the problem behavior.) If you do something to eliminate his frustration—maybe ask about his problem or give him the help he may need—then you will also have taken steps toward eliminating his problem behavior.

A child is sometimes not aware of what precisely he is doing wrong—and why. A parent’s careful observation helps a child gain the insight and understanding that are needed to correct a problem behavior.

“The main problem in our society is that people are expected to raise children in their spare time.”

—Urie Bronfenbrenner