

*Rachel Bailey's Parenting Academy*

# THE BEHAVIOR-IMPROVING TOOLBOX



**How to teach your children the tools they need to make  
the right choice, even when it's the hard choice**

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**NOTE: Since there are many suggestions for ways to each skill, I encourage you to focus on ONE SECTION AT A TIME.**

**Be sure your child is comfortable with one skill before they move to the next.**



# INTRODUCTION



# What? No Punishment?!

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Most of us were disciplined using “traditional” strategies. These strategies, such as rewards and punishment (how often were YOU grounded?!) are based on behavior modification techniques.

The idea is that if a child does something good and we reward them, they will keep doing that good thing. Similarly, if we punish them when they do something bad (for example, we take away their privileges because they didn't do their homework), they will dislike the punishment so much that they will stop doing the bad thing (avoiding homework).

Many of you have tried to use these strategies and have recognized that they don't work to motivate long-term positive behavior.



There are a few reasons for that – reasons that most parents are not aware of.

- 1.) Punishing a child for “misbehavior” does not address the root of the behavior.
- 2.) Punishing a child puts them deeper into “Yuck,” which only leads to more negative behavior – maybe not in the short run, but in the long run.
- 3.) Punishing a child does not teach them how to act differently the next time they're in a similar situation.

Let's look at teach of these reasons.

# Punishment (and Rewards) Don't Address the Root of the Behavior

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One of the first problems with punishment and rewards – which are both external motivators – is that they don't address what's CAUSING behavior, so negative behavior keeps re-appearing.

You can think of it like weeding a garden. If you pull out the weeds from their tops and leave the roots in the ground, then the weed will keep growing back. The same is true of behavior. If you don't get to the root of the behavior, then the behavior will keep coming back.

It's obvious that if a child is struggling with math and we punish them for struggling, that won't teach them to do better in math. Instead, we get them a math tutor.



The same is true with a child who is mean to his sister because he doesn't have the tools to regulate his emotions. If we punish him for not knowing how to regulate his emotions, it won't make his behavior change. Instead, we need to teach him to regulate his emotions... and then he knows how to change his behavior.

Note that not punishing kids **does NOT mean we let them “get away with” any behavior**. It just means that we focus on teaching them tools to be successful so they can do what they need to do, even when they don't want to. We teach them these tools of internal motivation so they do the right thing, even when we're not there to punish them.

# Punishment Doesn't Lead to Long-Term Positive Behavior

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Early in my career I heard a quote from Jane Nelson, the founder of Positive Discipline, which changed everything for me when it came to motivating better behavior in children (and adults!). That quote was “Where did we get the crazy idea that in order to get children to act better we need to make them feel worse?” When you think about it, it doesn't make sense that making kids feel worse would make them act better.

And there's actually a scientific reason why making kids feel worse doesn't lead to long-term positive behavior. And it's because of something that I call “The Yuck Factor.”



The Yuck Factor is a simple concept: When human beings are in a good place, we act positively. When we're well-rested, not overly stressed or sick, and when we are in a bad emotional place, we can be positive and patient.

But when we're in a bad place, a place that I call “Yuck,” we do not act positively. (I consider “Yuck” anything that is uncomfortable – when we're tired or hungry or stressed or sick or overwhelmed or afraid or sad... you get the idea.)

And that's because when we experience some sort of discomfort (Yuck), our brain actually considers that a threat... and it turns on our fight-or-flight response.

# Punishment Doesn't Lead to Long-Term Positive Behavior

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And when we're in fight-or-flight, we don't access the *mature, rational, positive behavior* part of our brain – the prefrontal cortex.

The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that allows us to act positively because it allows us to control our impulses, have empathy for others, regulate our emotions, think about our morals and values and act consistently with those, and other “mature” tasks.

But when we're in fight-or-flight, that response takes over the brain. Our fight-or-flight response actually shuts down any other part of the brain that it deems unnecessary at that moment. So when we're in Yuck, we act consistently with the qualities of our fight-or-flight response – NOT our prefrontal cortex. Instead of being mature, we are impulsive and controlling; we want what we want and we don't care what it takes to get there; we can't see the big picture, and we don't care about anyone else's feelings.



**When we're in Yuck, we don't behave positively.** And punishment, judgment, criticism, and any “attacking” behavior only puts kids (and adults) deeper into Yuck. EVEN IF a child acts more positively in the short-term, in the long run they still have that Yuck and will just become sneakier – not better behaved.

That's why punishment may work in the short run, but not in the long run. OF COURSE we need to be firm with kids and have strict rules and boundaries. But instead of using punishment (an external motivator) to shape behavior, we teach kids to follow those boundaries by motivating them internally – by teaching them tools to do hard things.

# Punishment Doesn't Teach Them

## What To Do Instead

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The last (and in my opinion, biggest) reason that punishment is ineffective as a long-term solution is that it doesn't teach children what to do the next time they are in a similar situation.

Let's say your son isn't cleaning his room, so you take away his electronics. Does that solve the problem in the long run? Does he clean his room all of the next times you ask?

Probably not – because punishment doesn't teach kids what to do differently the next time they face a similar situation.



There's a reason kids resist cleaning their rooms (and brushing their teeth and getting dressed in the morning and doing homework): Their brains aren't actually wired to do monotonous tasks. They're wired for stimulation and engagement, so when they're doing monotonous tasks, they start to get distracted by anything that's more engaging than what they're doing (and when they're cleaning their room, anything is more engaging!). And no, this is nothing to do with ADHD. This is true for ALL kids.

BUT... kids are going to have to clean their rooms and do other monotonous tasks. Life is full of these tasks. So what's the solution? *We teach them the tools* to do monotonous tasks – so they know how to do them *even when they don't feel like it*.

# You Can Still Use Punishment...

## But Please Teach Tools Also!

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It's worth repeating that you can – and should – be firm about setting boundaries. And for the record, I'm not telling you NOT to use punishment.

The truth is that most of us would be incredibly uncomfortable (WE'D go into Yuck) not using punishment. We believe that if we're not punishing kids, they'll think they can get away with things. (We almost imagine them laughing with their friends and saying, "Oh, I can do drugs. Mom and Dad never punish me.")



Although I know – from many years of experience working with hundreds of families – that NOT punishing is NOT the same thing as “letting kids get away with things,” I also know that punishing kids make us feel more in control. (We think, “See, I’m doing something about their negative behavior!”)

So if you're relying on punishment as a form of discipline, you don't have to stop! I just urge you to ADD teaching tools to your child as well. Because no matter what else you're doing, teaching your kids the tools they need to be successful will ultimately lead to more responsible behavior, more resilience, and more confidence as they realize they can rely on themselves to do the hard things in life.



## THE TOOLS

**NOTE: Since there are many suggestions for ways to each skill,**

**I encourage you to focus on ONE SECTION AT A TIME.**

**If you try to teach too much at once, both you and your child are likely to be overwhelmed.**



# The Tools That Kids Are Missing

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Kids are not little adults. They are not wired to act “mature.” Remember that pre-frontal cortex that I mentioned – the part of the brain that allows us to act mature and responsible? It doesn't fully develop until we are in our mid-20s.

Now that may be a reason that our kids don't do what we want them to, but it's NOT an excuse. Because I strongly believe that **kids still need to do what they have to do.**

So it's our job to set firm boundaries... and it's also our job to teach the kids the tools they need to be successful in meeting those boundaries.

That is how you raise kids who do what they're supposed to and who are resilient enough to be able to do the tough things in life – *because they have the tools to do them.*

The 4 tools that kids are missing that we'll focus on in this document are:

Tools for doing monotonous tasks

Tools for transitioning from one activity to another

Tools for solving problems

BONUS: Tools for handling Yuck



# HOW TO TEACH KIDS TO HANDLE MONOTONOUS TASKS



# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## The Background

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### Why We Have to Teach This Tool

Here's the thing: Kids are wired for stimulation, novelty, and engagement. (This is not because they have ADHD. This is true of all kids because the part of their brain that allows them to persist in monotonous tasks is not fully developed yet.)

That's why they have trouble with...

Cleaning, doing homework, sitting still at the table, getting dressed, brushing teeth... or anything else that isn't novel or doesn't offer stimulation or engagement.

Because here's what happens: When their brains aren't engaged, their brains will CREATE engagement. That means while they're getting dressed in the morning, they'll be "distracted" (engaged) by the toys in their room, by thoughts about what they're going to do that day – by anything that is more engaging than getting dressed..which is ANYTHING!

When they're sitting in the car, bored, they'll create engagement by bothering siblings or kicking your chair.

**But, they still have to do "monotonous" tasks like cleaning, doing homework, etc.**

The good news is that once children learn to make tasks engaging, they can stay on task (get dressed and clean up when you ask), behave better when they go places that are not necessarily kid-friendly (stores) and do what they're supposed to do (clean up, do homework, and leave their siblings alone). They just need to learn *how* to handle monotonous tasks.

# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## The Background

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**It's important to note that we're not teaching kids how to have fun all the time.**

The point of teaching our kids these engagement strategies is not to provide entertainment for them. Life isn't fun all the time.

On the contrary, the point of these strategies is to teach them how to remain focused so that they can do the things that need to get done – whether these tasks are “boring” or not.

And the best news? Children happen to enjoy these strategies, so they start to use them on their own.

I started to use engagement strategies with my daughter when she was about 2 1/2, and by the time she was 3 she was coming to ME every day telling me what engaging thing she was going to do during toothbrush time. I had nothing to do with it anymore.

A mother who had taught her 5<sup>th</sup> grader many of these strategies called me to thank me. She said that her son had started to get distracted during his math test... **but because he knew these strategies, he was able to reign himself back in and complete his exam.** She wasn't even around to remind him!

So use these strategies and realize that eventually when you repeat them often enough, children will internalize and start to use them independently.

# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## The Background

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### So How Do We Teach This?

Teaching kids to handle monotonous tasks is about working with their brains, instead of against them. Since we know kids' brains crave engagement, we can show them how to make tasks more stimulating by teaching them to

## Engage Their Brains and/or Engage Their Bodies

**Engaging their brain** means asking them to use their brain to complete an activity—name things, or pretend to be a character, or play a game, etc. (The next pages are filled with examples!)

**Engaging their body** means asking them to use their bodies to complete an activity—moving, using different body parts, etc. (The next pages are filled with examples!)

When they create engagement **WITHIN** the activity, they are much more likely to do what they're supposed to do.

# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## What Doesn't Work

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### EXAMPLES OF WHAT WE USUALLY DO THAT DOESN'T WORK

*If he has enough time, John is allowed to play video games before he leaves for school. But his mom has to ask him 5 times to get his shoes on each morning before he does.*

**The problem:** His video game is more engaging than getting his shoes on. He will be attracted to the thing that is most engaging. (It's like a magnet to his brain.)

**The solution:** Engage his brain or body. "John, can you get to your shoes by only taking 3 steps there and 3 steps back? Show me."

*Tara is sitting at the table, doing nothing, when she starts making loud noises. Tara's dad asks her to stop but she doesn't.*

**The problem:** Tara is making noise because she's seeking engagement. Her dad is telling her what not to do, but she doesn't know how to find the stimulation that her brain is craving in another way.

**The solution:** Engage her brain or body. "Tara, instead of making noises can you name 5 things that start with the letter B? I bet you can only do 3..."

### YOUR TURN!

*What's something your child doesn't do that they're supposed to do?*

*How do you respond?*

**The problem** (*Does that teach them to engage their brain or their body?*):

**The solution:**

On the next few pages, you'll see suggestions that are meant to give ideas for engaging kids' brains and bodies in different situations. Be creative and come up with some of your own ideas as well!

**Even better – ask your kids to come up with their own ideas so they can learn this skill on their own.**

# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## Examples

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### IDEAS FOR YOUNGER KIDS

#### IN THE GROCERY STORE

##### Engage Their Brain

- Ask them how many orange items they can find on the shelves or how many items they can find that start with the letter N.
- Have them find the letters in the alphabet (in order) using products in the store. See how many times they can go through the whole alphabet.

##### Engage Their Body

- Ask them to put something in the cart creatively... They can put an item in with one hand behind their back or while sticking their tongue out.

#### ON A CAR RIDE

##### Engage Their Brain

- Tell whopper stories – tell them a story and then add whoppers throughout: “and then a rabbit jumped up and landed on my head and I couldn’t shake it off...” Then have them tell you a whopper story.
- Let them pick an age in your life and you tell them a story from that year in your life.

##### Engage Their Body

- The “Body count” game.. Ask them to do something with their body. This can be as easy or as hard as you want it to be. (Blink 5 times, hop on one foot 3 times, etc.)
- Crafts (dollar store supplies are cheap and you can do so much with them)

#### CLEANING UP

##### Engage Their Brain

- Clean by color... Tell them to put away everything blue, and then everything red, etc.
- Make cleaning a mysterious mission by whispering “The first part of your mission is to clean up the legos. You will unlock the second part of the mission once that is done.” Continue until everything is cleaned.

##### Engage Their Body

- Put bins and baskets on the floor of the room you are trying to clean. Have them try to make a basket with the toys.
- Pretend your hands aren’t working and try to put things away with other body parts (toes, chins to carry things, etc.) . They get points for getting things in the place where they’re supposed to be.

# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## Examples

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### IDEAS FOR YOUNGER KIDS

#### AT DINNER TIME

##### Engage Their Brain

- Someone chooses a color. As a family, you name all of the foods you can think of with that color. If someone stops eating, the game stops.
- Tell a story around the table with each person telling a line. They have to eat 3 bites before they can tell their line.

##### Engage Their Body

- Play "I can... Can you?" You say, "I can take 2 bites of rice. Can you?" "I can eat with my opposite hand. Can you?" Everyone gets a turn saying, "I can... can you?"
- Play "Freeze song." Sing/play a song, and while the music is on, they must be eating. When you stop singing the song, they must stop mid-chew. Then start singing again.

#### GETTING DRESSED

##### Engage Their Brain

- Play Simon Says with putting articles of clothing on. (If you say "Simon says," they must obey the rule.)
- Make up a silly noise or phrase that you (or they) do after each item of clothing gets put on.

##### Engage Their Body

- Leave a trail of clothes for them to follow and put on
- Have them put on their clothes with their tongue sticking out the whole time

#### WAITING IN LINE (OR AT A DOCTOR'S OFFICE, ETC.)

##### Engage Their Brain

- Ask them to look at a space around them and try to remember it. Then tell them to close their eyes and ask them questions about it. (What was the color of the lamp, etc.?)
- Determine a word or phrase to listen for. Everyone stays quiet until they hear someone else around them area say that word or phrase.

##### Engage Their Body

- Ask them to act out a book or story
- Do songs that require them to use their bodies...hokey pokey, itsy bitsy spider, etc.
- Hide/identify an item and play "hot" or "cold" until they find it

# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## Examples

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### IDEAS FOR OLDER KIDS

(Note: Older kids should be coming up with their own ideas, so use these as ideas to start the conversation.)

#### HOMEWORK

##### Engage Their Brain

- When they are studying something, ask them to visualize pictures in their mind associated with the words they're studying.
- Let them listen to music. When music doesn't have lyrics, it can help with focus.

##### Engage Their Body

- Let them pace as they read or memorize words. Let them read out loud.
- Let them play with rubber bands as they're memorizing.

#### CLEANING THEIR ROOM

##### Engage Their Brain

- Challenge them to get their clothes picked up off of the floor before a song is over.
- Have them make up a song about how much they hate cleaning that they can sing to you after they're done.

##### Engage Their Body

- Set up bins around the room and let them play basketball with the non-fragile items that need to be put away
- Make cleaning Jenga. Write an area to clean on each Jenga piece. The one they choose is the one area they clean next.

#### GETTING DRESSED IN THE MORNING

##### Engage Their Brain

- Name their favorite songs (or books or movies) after each piece of item they put on
- Challenge them to get dressed faster than they did the day before

##### Engage Their Body

- Have them put their clothes on in different rooms in the house to increase novelty

# HANDLING MONOTONOUS TASKS:

## What Will YOU Do?

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**What is something you'd like your kids to do that they're not currently doing?**

**What is one way they can engage their brains when doing this task?**

**Your idea:**

**Their idea:**

**What is one way they can engage their bodies when doing this task?**

**Your idea:**

**Their idea:**



# HOW TO TEACH KIDS TO TRANSITION MORE EASILY



# HANDLING TRANSITIONS:

## The Background

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### Why We Have to Teach This Tool

Kids' brains don't easily transition from one task to another, ESPECIALLY if they are engaged in something. Do you remember that in the last section I mentioned that kids' brains are wired for engagement? Yup. So once they're engaged, their brains want to stay in that spot.

(And by the way, we adults are the same way! Imagine you are in the middle of trying to pay your bills online, you're focused, and your child comes up and says "MOM!" or "DAD!" and interrupts you ...It's frustrating for us – and our brains.)

So when we ask them to transition, it's like they're watching a cliffhanger on TV and we ask them to stop right before they find out if the main character dies. It creates a lot of Yuck (and therefore negative behavior – disrespect, ignoring, meltdowns).

That's why they have trouble with...

Getting off of electronics to come to the dinner table; leaving birthday parties, playgrounds, and other places that provide stimulation; going to new places (even if they know they'll have fun once they get there)

**But, they still have to make those transitions!**

The good news is that if we understand how brains work, we can teach them tools for transitioning more easily so that it's not as uncomfortable for them – or for us.

# HANDLING TRANSITIONS:

## The Background

23

### How We Teach This

Just like teaching kids to handle monotonous tasks, teaching kids to transition is about working with their brains instead of against them. And what the brain craves is closure. Once an activity is over, we have a much easier time disengaging from it. (You're happy to answer your child's question once you've finished paying your bills.) So we start helping kids transition when we:

## Use the Rhythm of the Activity

(rather than the clock) to create a stopping point

Have them transition **AFTER** they've gotten to the end of a level on a video game or the end of a chapter in a book or the end of a scene in a movie. (I'll give you examples on the next few pages.)



But let's say there **IS** no end point to an activity... **OR** you haven't come up with an end point ahead of time. In that case you're going to help them

## Slowly Transition From One Mental Space to the Next

Instead of yanking their brain out of its state of engagement, teach them to slowly descend from that place (in their minds) to the place where they have to be. You do this by getting into their world with them and talking to them about what they were doing as you shift to the next activity. (I'll give you examples on the next few pages.)

# HANDLING TRANSITIONS:

## What Doesn't Work

24

### EXAMPLES OF WHAT WE USUALLY DO THAT DOESN'T WORK

*Patrick's mom is playing a game with him. When she tells him he only has five minutes until they have to stop, he throws a fit.*

**The problem:** Because Patrick is in the middle of doing something he enjoys, he gets upset at the thought of having to end.

**The solution:** Patrick's mom can help Patrick create some closure so that the end point of the game won't be so abrupt. She has him what he'd like his last 3 moves to be so his brain has a chance to anticipate the closure of the activity.

*Amelia's dad has taken her to the playground. When it starts to rain and her dad tells her they have to run to the car, Amelia refuses to leave.*

**The problem:** Amelia was in the middle of doing something engaging, and all of a sudden she was asked to stop. She has difficulty making this type of transition.

**The solution:** Amelia's dad could ask her about what she was playing as they run to the car. Continuing the engagement will help her transition more easily.

### YOUR TURN!

*What is a transition (from one activity to another) that your child struggles with?*

*How do you respond?*

**The problem** *(Does your response provide closure or help them slowly transition?):*

**The solution:**

On the next few pages, you'll see suggestions that are meant to give ideas for teaching kids how to transition between activities, especially if one of them is engaging them!

# HANDLING TRANSITIONS

## Examples

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**If you can, before a child needs to make a transition, ask them to identify an end point.**

If they're going to a friend's house, instead of "I'll pick you up at 7:00", say,  
"I'll pick you up after dinner."

If they're going to a playground, instead of "We're leaving in 5 minutes," say,  
"We're leaving after you go down the slide 8 more times."

If they're playing a video game, instead of "You have 30 minutes to play," say,  
"What's a good stopping point that falls within 30 minutes?"

**If you haven't done that, about 10 minutes before they have to transition, ask them to identify an end point.**

"We need to leave soon. What's the last thing you want to do before we go?"

"What's the one thing you want to finish before we leave?"

"I can see you're in the middle of doing something. We need to leave soon. What's a good place for you to stop that activity?"

# HANDLING TRANSITIONS

## Examples

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**If you haven't done any of that, get into their world and help them slowly transition out**

**Walk over to them, look at what they're doing and say:**

"I can see that you're watching 'XYZ Show.' What did [main character's name] do in this episode?  
Why don't you tell me as we walk to the dinner table."

"Wow, you're on level 4 of your game? How did you do that? Tell me about it on the way to soccer  
practice!"

"You and your friend were obviously having a lot of fun. Can you tell me about what you were  
doing? Is it something we could do together sometime?"



**So remember...**

**When they have to get off of electronics ...**

Instead of saying, "Stop playing, It's time for dinner!"

Try:

Asking them ahead of time what a good stopping point will be OR

Asking them what their last thing will be OR

Letting them tell you what they were doing as they come to the dinner table

# HANDLING TRANSITIONS

## Examples

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### **When they have to go to bed...**

Instead of saying, "I know you're in the middle of [activity], but it's time for bed."

Try:

Choosing an end point to the activity before it begins OR

Asking them to choose the last part of the activity they'd like to complete OR

Asking them to tell you what they might do the next day with that activity as you walk to bed together

### **When they have to leave something fun...**

Instead of saying, "It's time to leave! Now!"

Try:

Having them identify a natural stopping point in the event before it begins OR

Asking them to choose the last thing they'd like to do before they leave OR

Asking them questions about different parts of the event as you leave together

# HANDLING TRANSITIONS:

## What Will YOU Do?

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**What transitions does your child struggle with?**

**What are two ways you can make the transition more successful?**

**Your idea:**

**Their idea:**



# HOW TO TEACH KIDS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS



# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## The Background

30

### Why We Have to Teach This Tool

Kids are not born problem-solvers. In fact, most kids don't even recognize problems, let alone know how to solve them. If three siblings all want to use one iPad, they're not thinking, "Hmm, there are three of us and one iPad... that's a problem." Instead, they're thinking, "I want that iPad so I'll take it."

And if they can't even identify problems, they certainly don't know how to solve them. Often we tell kids, "I know you can solve this problem." But can they? Kids don't naturally possess problem-solving skills or conflict resolution skills. (Heck, many adults don't have those!) And we adults are solving their problems for them all the time. They're cold? We tell them to put on a jacket. They're hungry? We tell them the snacks are in the cupboard (or we give them a snack ourselves).

That's why they have trouble with

Knowing how to deal with siblings or friends who have different opinions; knowing what to say if they have to talk to a teachers; expressing their feelings instead of acting out...

**But, they still have to solve problems – on a daily basis!**

The good news is that if we teach them how to solve problems, they can improve their relationships with others, take more healthy risks, and feel so much more confident in their own abilities.

# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## The Background

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### How We Teach This

We can teach kids to solve problems every day.

One of the phrases I've used in my house as my kids were growing up is that "We do solutions, not complaints." Say this genuinely – not sarcastically or angrily, which we're all tempted to do – and kids really do start to focus on solutions... If for no other reason than they get tired of hearing that phrase!

So we can...

## Use Everyday Situations to Teach Kids

### How to Solve Problems

Instead of solving problems *for* them, we can ask them questions that help them learn to identify problems and solutions. We can practice this skill with them until it becomes natural. This doesn't actually take long, and it really does result in less fighting and more confidence in the home!

# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## What Doesn't Work

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### EXAMPLES OF WHAT WE USUALLY DO THAT DOESN'T WORK

*Julia is fighting with her brother Thomas. Her mom tells them to work it out. They continue fighting until she feels like she has to punish both of them.*

**The problem:** Julia and Thomas don't instinctively know how to see their sibling's perspective and identify compromises.

**The solution:** Julia and Thomas's mom can help them each understand the other child's point of view. She can teach them a solution that takes each of their perspectives into account.

*Stephen is getting in trouble at school for talking. Stephen's dad takes away his electronics privileges, but Stephen continues talking at school and getting in trouble.*

**The problem:** Stephen is likely talking at school because he's bored. But he probably doesn't know what the problem IS, let alone how to solve it.

**The solution:** Stephen and his dad can discuss what is motivating the talking. Then they can brainstorm other ways for Stephen to deal with his boredom in the class.

### YOUR TURN!

*What is a behavior that your child does that frustrates you?*

*How do you respond?*

**The problem:** *(Do you/your child know what's causing the behavior? Do you/your child know how to solve that problem?)*

**The solution:**

On the next few pages, you'll see suggestions that will teach you how to improve your child's problem-solving skills on a daily basis!

# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## Examples

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### How to Teach Kids To Solve Problems

#### Ask: "What do you need?"

We are so used to solving problems for our kids that it comes naturally to us. But we can start to teach them to solve problems at about age 3 with a simple question, "What do you need?"

Let's say your kids are sitting in the back seat of the car and one says, "The music is too loud!" Ask them (without sarcasm), "What do you need?"

It sounds like a simple question, but that question forces them *to identify what they need* and *figure out how to ask for it* – an incredibly important tool when solving problems. In this case, when you say, "What do you need?" they'll answer, "Can you turn the music down?" And the truth is that they eventually become sick of you asking the question "What do you need?" and just learn how to ask for what they need in the first place!

This question will help them solve the problem when they don't know how to ask a teacher for help, or when they're dealing with a peer or friend who's not being respectful – because they'll know how *to figure out what they need and how to ask for it*.

#### Say: "Here's what I'd do... What would work for you?"

I mentioned earlier that one motto in our house is "We don't do complains; we do solutions." Often when you ask your child, "What's the solution?" they say, "I don't know" – because they genuinely don't know! It's important that we empower kids to find solutions without giving them solutions.

# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## Examples

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One way to do that is to say, "I'll tell you what I'd do in that situation... But can you tell me if you'd need to change anything to make that solution work for you?"

So if they say, "My friend Georgia keeps talking to me in class, and I keep getting in trouble for it!" and they tell you they don't know the solution, you could say, "Well I know what I'd do. I'd ask the teacher to move me away from Georgia's desk so that can't happen. But I'm not in your shoes. Would that work for you? Or do you need to do something completely different?"

### **Teach the language of solutions**

Another way to teach kids to solve problems is to teach them what it sounds like to solve problems. Often kids can't think of solutions because they aren't sure where to start. If you can break it down for them, it seems less overwhelming. One way to do that is to teach them: "Solutions usually start with 'Can I please...?' or 'Can you please...?'"

Let's say your daughter is struggling with a coach on her sports team. You don't necessarily want to step in (remember, you're helping her solve problems now!), but she doesn't know how to handle it. You can remind her that "Solutions usually start with 'Can I please...?' or 'Can you please...?'" which is likely to reduce her overwhelm as she now knows she can begin with "Can I please talk to you about how I'm feeling?"

# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## Examples

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### **Ask them to solve your problems**

Kids need practice solving problems. The more they do it, the more confident they will become. And, as we all know, kids love to tell us what to do.

To help them practice solving problems, you can come up with problems for them to solve for you. You might say something like, "Shoot, I scheduled two things at the same time tomorrow. I can't be in two places at once. How should I solve this?"

Or at the dinner table you can ask them to solve problems (real or made up) that you faced that day that you'd like their "advice" about.

The problem doesn't have to be one they would actually face... Solving any type of problem helps them build their problem-solving skills and muscles!

### **Teach them to solve issues that keep coming up**

When kids are not doing what we want them to (they're not doing homework when they're supposed to, they keep dropping their stuff all over the house), we think we need to find the right "punishment" to get them to act differently.

But kids as old as 4 years old can be involved in plans for solving problems that keep coming up. After you set a boundary ("When you get home from school, your bag needs to go on the hook and your shoes in the bin,") you can say, "I've noticed that that's not been happening. What's going on for you in those situations?" Then listen to their perspective, because that will help both of you and them solve the problem because you'll understand what tool they are missing.

# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## Examples

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Then you can ask “what do you need in order to make sure these tasks get done?” Especially if they’ve been practicing problem-solving, often kids will come up with plans to solve “behavior problems” that we never would have thought of!

As an additional bonus, kids can also come up the solution if their plan isn’t working (another problem). So you could say, “OK, I love your plan for how you’ll put your bag and shoes away. What do you want me to do if you don’t follow that plan one day?”

Not only does this teach kids to solve problems, but it gives them a sense of control (which is more likely to lead to good behavior) AND it forces them to think about what steps need to be taken in order to act responsible. Often kids aren’t thinking about any of this because we’re solving the problems for them!

### **Celebrate problem solving**

One of the most successful ways I’ve motivated my own kids to solve problems is to make a big deal when any of us solve problems. Our ritual (which we started when the kids were about 2 1/2) is that when someone solves a problem, we use their initials and then the letters “PS,” which stands for “problem solver.” So if I solved a problem, my kids would point to me and say, “RBPS!” Or if my daughter Emily solved a problem we’d say “EBPS!” This type of positive recognition makes them WANT to solve problems... so when we ask them to do that at other times, there is already a positive association with problem solving in their minds.

Older kids may not want to use this “initials” ritual, but treating older kids with respect when they solve problems does the trick as well: “Wow, I wouldn’t have come up with that solution. That was a good one.”

# SOLVING PROBLEMS

## What Will YOU Do?

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**What is a behavior in your child you'd like to change?**

**What is one thing you can ask them to help them solve that "problem" (that they want to do something that they're not supposed to do)?**

**What 2 strategies will you use to help them learn to solve problems every day?**

# BONUS:

## YUCK RELEASE STRATEGIES



**Yuck Release Strategies  
help children and adults  
reduce (or eliminate) Yuck in a healthy way...  
so they don't take it out on others or themselves.**

Note: Yuck Release Strategies are only a portion of an emotional regulation plan. If you need help teaching your child emotional regulation skills more generally, please contact me at [Rachel@Rachel-Bailey.com](mailto:Rachel@Rachel-Bailey.com).

# What Are Yuck Release Strategies? (And Why Do We Need Them?)

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To understand Yuck Release Strategies, we need to start with a review of "The Yuck Factor."

"The Yuck Factor" is a simple principle:

**When humans feel good, we act positively.**



When we have gotten enough sleep, when we are not hungry... when we've had a generally good day... we can be respectful and thoughtful of others. We behave in a way that is consistent with our morals and values.

**When humans are in Yuck, we act negatively.**

On the other hand, when we are in any sort of Yuck...when we feel anything negative, such as feeling tired, hungry, overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated, angry, hurt, etc...we often act in a way that we later regret.

**Think about it...**

Imagine your child doing something that frustrates you. Perhaps they're whining, or perhaps they've forgotten to bring their notebook home from school AGAIN.

When you've had a good day (maybe you've gotten a lot of sleep, you've had a good conversation with a friend or spouse, you've had some time to yourself), how do you respond to your child's frustrating behavior?



When you've had a bad day (maybe you're tired, you've existed on sugar and coffee all day, you've gotten into an argument with someone), how do you respond to your child's frustrating behavior?

You probably respond to your child differently in those two situations. But notice *that it's not your child's behavior that determined your reaction*. (Their behavior was the same in each scenario.) It is how you were feeling that determined your reaction. For so many of us, Yuck drives our behavior.

# The Problem With NOT Releasing Yuck

So now you know that Yuck affects behavior. But exactly HOW does it affect behavior?

Most people do one of 3 things when they're in Yuck:



## 1.) Turn it out

As adults, we turn Yuck out when we have a bad day and then take it out on our kids, or our spouse, or a friend. When kids turn Yuck out, they typically become disrespectful, or aggressive, or defiant. They may also refuse to take responsibility for their behavior and blame others.

## 2.) Turn it in

As adults, we might make a mistake and you say, "Ugh, I'm an awful parent. Why do I keep making the same mistakes over and over?" That's Yuck turned in.

When kids turn Yuck in, they think that everything bad that happens is their fault. They say, "I can't do anything right." or "I'm stupid," or "No one likes me." This may eventually turn into low self-esteem or anxiety (or other issues).

## 3.) Numb it

As adults, when we've had a really long day we "numb" with a glass of wine, or chocolate or other "comfort" food... or we tune out on social media or Netflix.

When kids numb Yuck, they start to want to only be on their electronics, playing a certain video game or watching TV shows. They don't want to do anything else. As they get older, they turn to drugs, or alcohol, or sex, or other compulsive behaviors to reduce their feelings of Yuck.

So...

**Yuck release strategies are meant to offer an alternative to turning Yuck out, turning it in, or numbing it. They are meant *to replace the behaviors that we inevitably regret.* Ideally, they help us release (or at least tolerate) the discomfort that Yuck causes so we don't turn it out, turn it in, or numb it.**

# A Warning About Yuck Release Strategies

## WARNING!

**It is NOT a good idea to suggest that a child try a Yuck Release Strategy when they are IN Yuck.**

You may have tried this before and recognized that it doesn't work very well...

But even if you haven't tried it, imagine it now: Your child is very angry or upset and you say, "Why don't you try to do some deep breathing?!"

How would they react?!



The key to helping your child use Yuck Release strategies is to

**PRACTICE THESE YUCK RELEASE STRATEGIES WHEN CHILDREN ARE NOT IN YUCK.**

That's because when we are in Yuck, all humans default to behavior that is comfortable and familiar – behavior that we have "practiced" many times before.

So if children don't practice these new strategies frequently and regularly when they're not emotionally flooded, then during times of Yuck they will naturally revert to the old negative behavior that they have used so many times before.

Ultimately, with time and patience – and when they realize that these strategies are actually comforting – children eventually CHOOSE to use these strategies themselves. And then you don't even have to suggest it to them when they're upset.

See the appendix for suggestions for how to practice these strategies with kids.

# Let's Get Started!

## Directions:

On the following pages, look at the names and descriptions of the Yuck Release Strategies and choose one (or two at most) that seems like it would be a good fit for your child. Whenever possible, ask your child for their input about the strategy they'd like to try.

Notice that the strategies are broken down by general "type" of release. For example, for physical kids, movement may be a more effective Yuck Release Strategy tool than the more "cognitive" (and not-so-active) tools like thinking of something calm in their heads.

Then choose one (or two at most) to practice IN BETWEEN TIMES OF YUCK.

# Yuck Release Strategies for Kids

## BREATHING STRATEGIES

**Use a pinwheel:** Take a deep breath in for a count of 4. Then exhale and blow on the pinwheel to make it move. Repeat.

**Snake exhale:** Take a deep breath in for a count of 4. Then exhale using a "hissing" sound that a snake would make. Repeat.

**Balloon breathe:** Pretend your belly has a balloon in it. Take a deep breath in for a count of 4 to inflate the balloon (belly should rise). Then exhale to deflate the balloon (belly should flatten).

## COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

**Visualize something that calms you:** Imagine something that makes you feel safe and loved – a hug from a parent, curling up in a sleeping bag, etc.

**Sing a relaxing song in your head:** Think of a song that makes you feel safe and loved – something a parent sings to you at night, etc.

**Repeat a phrase:** Say a simple, comforting phrase over and over – "I'm safe. I'm safe. I'm safe."

## PHYSICAL STRATEGIES

**Cross your arms behind your back:** Take your right arm and put it behind you, reaching to the left side of your body. Take your left arm and put it behind you, reaching the right side of your body.

**Stomp your feet:** Stomp down hard, as if you're squashing all the bad things on the floor.

**Rip paper:** Put together 2 or 3 sheets of paper and rip it. Get more paper if necessary.

**Scream into a pillow:** Get something big and soft to scream into.

## SENSORY STRATEGIES

**Use a sensory jar:** Sensory jars are mostly liquid, but there are solid objects that will float through the liquid as you turn it upside down. [It is easy to make one on your own.](#) (Click on link for ideas.)

**Pet an animal:** Repetitively pet a soft animal (if this can be done without hurting the animal)

**Squeeze a pillow or big stuffed animal:** Use a large stuffed animal or pillow and squeeze as hard as you can.

**Wrap yourself in a blanket:** Use a soft blanket and wrap yourself tightly in it, as if it is a cocoon.

**Push your palms against something hard:** Use a surface (desk, table) or even a wall and push as hard as you can.

# Yuck Release Strategies for Adolescents and Adults

## PHYSIOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

**Square breathing:** Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts. Repeat.

**Breath counting:** Count 1 as you exhale; inhale; count 2 as you exhale; inhale. Continue until a count of 5. Start over with 1.

**Progressive relaxation:** Focus on tightening and relaxing each part of your body. Start with your toes and progressively make your way up to the top of your head.

## COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

**Visualize Something that calms you:** Imagine something that makes you feel safe and loved – a hug from a child, the face of someone you love, etc.

**Sing a relaxing song in your head:** Think of a song that reminds you of a calm time – something you sing to your children, something that was sung to you as a child, etc.

**Repeat a mantra:** Repeat a comforting phrase over and over – “this too shall pass,” “your emotions don’t control my emotions,” etc.

**Do something that requires concentration (math problem, etc.):** Think of something that is not too difficult but that does require you to concentrate a bit –  $24+17$  or naming three foods that begin with “c.”

**Do the opposite of what you want to do:** If you want to yell, whisper. If you want to say something mean to your child, say something loving instead. If you want to scream, laugh instead.

## PHYSICAL STRATEGIES

**Move your body (especially crossing the midline of your body):** Give yourself a hug, cross your arms in front of your body and then behind your body, etc.

**Rip paper:** Put together 2 or 3 sheets of paper and rip it. Get more paper if necessary.

**Do pushups:** Do pushups (or jumping jacks, etc.) until you wear yourself out.

## SENSORY STRATEGIES

**Squeeze your fists:** Make your fists into balls. You may want to dig your nails into your palms.

**Push your palms against something hard:** Use a surface (desk, table) or even a wall and push as hard as you can.

**Snap a rubber band, hold ice:** Do something that will shock one of your senses.

# Yuck Release Strategies for Adolescents and Adults

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## CREATIVE STRATEGIES

**Write/Write in your head :** If you enjoy writing, write about whatever comes into your mind. Write on paper or in your head if you don't have any paper around.

**Paint/ Imagine painting:** If you enjoy painting, think of something you want to paint. Paint on a real canvas or imagine the painting in your head.

**Photography/ Imagine taking pictures:** If you enjoy photography, think of something you want to take a picture of. Take real pictures or just imagine taking them.

**Music/ Compose in your head :** If you writing music, think of something song you'd like to write. Write down the music/lyrics or just compose in your head.

## SPIRITUAL STRATEGIES

**Listen to relaxing music:** Find music that calms you down and listen to it; focus on what you hear as you listen.

**Read motivational quotes:** Find or recall quotes that remind you of your personal values.

**Practice gratitude:** Recall the things in your life you have to be grateful for. (I personally remember that even when my kids are being a pain, they are still healthy and safe.)

**Do something for someone else:** Make a gesture that you know will make someone else feel good.

**Be / Picture yourself in nature:** Go outside, or if not possible, imagine you are outside.

# HOW to Practice

## Yuck Release Strategies

Now that you understand the importance of practicing Yuck Release Strategies proactively, have your child choose one a strategy that sounds like it might be useful and practice it in the following ways:

### Practicing Yuck Release Strategies With Younger Kids

**Do role plays:** Kids love to play the role of parent, so you could do a role play where they are the parent and you are the child getting upset. You show them (as the child) what it looks like to do their Yuck Release Strategy. Then switch roles.

**Have them teach a doll (or stuffed animal, etc.) the strategy:**

Have them teach the strategy to someone or something else. You can coach them, "Tell your bear what to do when he's really angry..."

**Books, movies and TV shows:** Read them books or watch shows or movies that have a character who gets angry or upset. Discuss how that character handled it. Talk to your child about their OWN Yuck Release Strategy and how it might work for them.

**Practice regularly:** Once or twice during the day, tell your child you're frustrated and ask them to show you how you should handle it.

### Practicing Yuck Release Strategies With Older Kids

**Ask what you could have done differently:** Kids love to correct you or tell you what you've done wrong! The next time you lose your cool with them, ask them how you could have handled your Yuck differently. As they're "teaching" you, they're actually learning how to regulate their own emotions.

**Ask for their advice:** Tell them about a situation you're facing that causes you Yuck. Treat them as if they are the expert, and ask them (with curiosity) how they might handle that situation.

**Books, movies, and TV shows:** Discuss a book, movie, or TV show with them and talk about characters and how they handle their Yuck. Ask them what they would have done the same or differently if they were that character.

# WHEN to Practice Yuck Release Strategies

## When to Practice Yuck Release Strategies

**1. Practice when you're already doing something** that a child has to do anyway – driving home from school, eating dinner, etc.

Most kids won't want to take time away from playing to practice these strategies. In fact, they may start to resent these strategies if they interrupt their fun.

**2. Make your practice routine.** For example, if you're going to practice at dinner time, choose the same days to practice. Having a routine makes it much more likely that you'll do what you say.

**3. Practice when your kids are NOT IN YUCK.** It's a good idea to do some sort of connection with them first – play a silly game with younger kids, ask the kids to help you with something – before jumping into this

Last hint: **Ask your child to hold YOU accountable** for making sure this practice happens. When they feel control/power over a situation, they're much more likely to buy into it.