



Harris County Hospital District

Media Contact: Connie Chavez
Office: 713-566-4370
Cell: 713-240-6484
Connie_Chavez@hchd.tmc.edu
On-call pager: 713-566-6430

NEWS RELEASE

When Little Angels Act Like Little Devils

HOUSTON (October 1, 2007) – After a hectic day at work and bumper-to-bumper traffic, you make it to your child’s day care – only to be told that your angel has been acting more like a little devil, kicking, hitting and biting. If this behavior continues, the teacher says, your child will be kicked out of school at the tender age of three. Where did you go wrong?

It’s not unusual for people to question their parenting skills or feel helpless when their child’s behavior takes a turn for the worse. While certain behaviors are a normal part of development, setting structures and limits for young children is a parent’s number one task, said Dr. John Sargent, the director of youth and adolescent psychiatry at Ben Taub General Hospital.

“As they grow, children spend a lot of time trying to figure out the world around them, so parents need to create a world where their children can learn and explore and feel safe and protected,” said Sargent. “It’s also important for parents to understand what their child is trying to communicate through behavior, especially when they don’t yet have the skills to communicate with words.” Behavioral problems can start early, but patience and understanding can help make these periods more endurable for both the parents and the child.

Biting

Biting is the most common reason for children being expelled from day care, according to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Children can begin biting as soon as they get teeth, as a way of exploring or to sooth the discomfort of teething. Toddlers may bite to garner attention, express frustration, or test limits. Whatever the reason, parents should have a firm, consistent way to tell them it’s not okay to bite.

“With very young children, parents should stop what they are doing, say no, and get back to what they were doing before,” said Sargent. “The biggest mistake you can make is reinforcing the behavior by getting too excited or paying too much attention to the situation.”

With toddlers, try explaining that biting hurts, but don’t bite the child back to teach them this lesson. Sending them to “time out” is another way to send the message that this is unacceptable behavior.

Fighting or Hitting

Young children may often fight over toys or other territorial issues. They may also hit out of anger or frustration. Whatever the reason, it is important for parents and caregivers to identify patterns that lead to this type of behavior and intervene before the child strikes. Tell them that hitting is unacceptable and that it hurts. Supervise aggressive children closely and, if possible, intervene before a situation turns violent.

(more)

Page 2/Bratty Behavior

It's also important for parents to avoid playing judge when two siblings fight. "Both kids should get time out, regardless of who started it," said Sargent. "Parents should explain to children that they can help settle disagreements before a fight breaks out. However, once hitting is involved, everyone will get time out."

Temper Tantrums

Consistency also plays an important role when dealing with tantrums, which are often how children emphasize the degree to which they are frustrated or upset. "Nobody likes being told no, and children naturally will feel upset or frustrated," said Sargent. "The key is to teach children self-control and self-management."

A widely successful technique is talking to children about discipline before it has to be used. Explain to the child that if they behave in a way that is unacceptable, they will be put in time out. The rule of thumb is one minute per year of age. During this time, do not interact with the child. "Some kids will cry and cry until they eventually stop. The goal is to teach a child how to calm themselves down," said Sargent. "Once the time out is over, let them return to playing or whatever else they were doing. This will reinforce their learning how to calm themselves and manage their emotions."

"Children often imitate what parents do, so parents need to be responsible role models. Don't get into a shouting match with your child and don't take things personally. Above all, never discipline a child out of anger," Sargent added.

While these behaviors are common among young children, severe or persistent cases can be an indication of a more serious emotional or behavioral health problem that requires professional attention. Parents should consult with their pediatricians if this occurs.

The Harris County Hospital District is the public health care system for the nation's third most-populous county. It provides more than 1 million health care visits each year to uninsured and underinsured residents of Harris County. The hospital district operates Ben Taub General Hospital, Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, Quentin Mease Community Hospital, and an extensive network of community-based clinics, health centers, and mobile health units.

###