

# Brattleboro Reformer

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## **FAMILY MATTERS: Positive Solutions for Parents, part two**

By Chloe Learey

Last month, I wrote about “Positive Solutions for Parents,” a framework which outlines the foundations and strategies for supporting your child’s social emotional development with a positive approach. The upcoming episode of Family Matters, the talk show on Brattleboro Community Television where we discuss topics of interest to families with young children, again features Brandy Levesque, an Early Childhood Educator who has worked in the field for many years, and currently works as an Inclusion Facilitator and in Children’s Integrated Services (CIS). Brandy talks more in depth about some of the concrete strategies she touched on in her first appearance. While there are a multitude of ideas for parents to try, we focus on four strategies that are solid tools for all parents to have as they learn how to support their child.

One strategy is to have realistic expectations. Picture a busy morning, everyone getting ready for the day and trying to get out of the house in time to get to work and school. After your 3-year old finishes breakfast you tell him there are some clothes on his bed and ask him to go get dressed. Ten minutes later you find him in the middle of his room only half-dressed and playing with Legos. “What are you doing?! I told you to get dressed!” Sometimes challenging situations arise when there is a mismatch between when our expectations for what children can do are either too high or too low. Expecting a 3 year old to successfully get dressed from bottom to top without support even if you have laid out their clothes can be a set up that leads to frustration. Some step-by-step reminders and check-ins such as “What will you put on first? or Did you get your shirt on yet? or Don’t forget your socks!” can help keep a child on task. The other side of the equation, having expectations that are too low, can also lead to frustrating situations. If you are laying out clothes and your child wants to independently choose her own, you may end up running into problems. Understanding your child and where they are developmentally can help you develop realistic expectations.

A second strategy is to stay calm. If a child’s safety is not immediately in question then this strategy gives parents time to respond instead of react to a challenging or frustrating situation. It is okay to say “I’m having some strong feelings right now, so I am going to take a few breaths before we figure out what to do next.” The beauty of this strategy is that it both gives you time to be more thoughtful and provides an example to children of how they can also handle their strong emotions. Responding to their

melt-down by yelling at them to “Be quiet!” sends a very different message about how we regulate ourselves.

A third strategy is to state expectations in advance. Grocery stores, birthday parties, restaurants, and other public events and places are all ripe with opportunities to trigger frustrations and challenging behaviors. How many children have you seen melting down in the store because they could not get the treat they wanted? And, the fact that other people are bearing witness to your parenting can make it even more difficult to thoughtfully respond. Again, knowing your child and potential triggers for these situations can help you prepare her ahead of time for what is happening. A script like: “We are going to the store to buy a birthday gift for your friend. This is the only thing we are buying today, so please do not ask if you can get something, too, or we will have to leave” can help alleviate negotiations in the moment and make the shopping go more smoothly. Consistency, predictability and follow-through are important. So, if you say you are going to leave, you actually do.

A fourth strategy is to offer limited choices. There are multiple benefits to this strategy. It can be used preventively or as a response, and it also supports building skills like independence and the ability to make choices. In addition, it allows a child to have some control over his world, something that is important but often missing. If you know your child is going to have a hard time putting on his coat, hat and mittens because he is so excited to get outside, you can prepare him by asking which items he would like to put on first. Or, if your child doesn’t like the clothes you have picked out you can offer a couple other options in the moment. Too many choices or open-ended options such as “What do you want to wear?” can be overwhelming and cause derailment. However, limited choices such as “Do you want the blue dress or the green dress?” helps set the situation up for success.

Children are very busy learning how to be in the world. When challenging situations arise, it is often because they do not have the skills they need to navigate successfully to where they want to be. Whatever strategies families use, it is important to keep in mind the simple question of what are you teaching. We may not always know what a child needs to learn, and parenting, like any relationship, is built on trial and error. Spending time getting to know your child and creating a strong relationship is key to parents successfully using these types of strategies and to being their child’s first and most important teacher.

Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Childhood Development in Brattleboro. You can watch episodes of FAMILY MATTERS by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/> *The opinions expressed by columnists do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brattleboro Reformer.*

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