

Parent and Teacher Tips for Children with Neurobehavioral Disorders (Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD, ODD, Autism)

A. Helpful Principles Regarding Neurobehavioral Disorders (NBDs):

1. **Self-regulation** is one of the core deficits in NBDs; inattention and impulsivity are secondary to this. Self-regulation means doing what you should do, even though you don't want to, and not doing what you shouldn't, even though you do want to. As one parent said, "For some things there is no "ON" switch, and for others there is no "OFF."
2. Kids with NBD often choose the specific behaviors, but **they did not choose** the underlying temperament and core deficit in self-regulation. The adult role, then, becomes providing external strategies for self-regulation until kids develop more internal controls.
3. Despite not choosing to have a problem, **NBD is an explanation, not an excuse**, so kids are still accountable for repairing goofs and trying to manage their NBD.
4. The **grace** we extend kids who have NBDs applies more to our attitude toward them than it does to their accountability. If we can hold kids accountable, to the level of their own self-regulation ability, while maintaining a neutral or even encouraging attitude, then we can be the most helpful to the growth of our child.
5. NBD kids **live in the moment**, with the goal of "maximize pleasure, minimize pain." This accounts for expedient lying, insatiability, feelings of being overwhelmed when faced with long and effortful tasks, externalization of blame, and difficulty linking behavior to consequences.
6. NBD kids need **explicit connections** drawn for them between cause and effect; even then, it may take them multiple trials to understand the connections.
7. Children with NBDs are "**state-dependent**." The state of their bodies, sleep, hunger, sensory stimulation, people around them, and being thwarted etc. can easily destabilize their mood and behavior.
8. NBD kids are often **egocentric rather than selfish**; selfishness is knowing exactly how you impact others and making a decision to do it anyway.
9. NBD kids, when they do not know why others did what they did, make an "**attribution bias**" of thinking others intended the behavior or the outcome. As soon as people think others did them wrong on purpose, they become angry and react poorly. Kids with NBDs may need to be taught alternative explanations for human behavior so they don't default automatically to the attribution bias.

B. Specific behavioral strategies and principles:

10. Behavior management for kids with NBDs is the usually the same as stress management. **When they act out, look for the stressors.** For children with externalizing disorders, any negative emotion, including anxiety and sadness, may look like angry, resistant behavior on the surface.
11. NBD kids need structure and interventions far **longer** than most kids to gain improvement. Parents and teachers may give up on a strategy too soon; it may take 3-4 weeks to start seeing improvement.
12. The goal of our behavioral strategies is **improvement** in the target behavior, not perfection. If we get 25% improvement, the strategy may be worth keeping.
13. If it is difficult to tell whether a behavior is an NBD mistake or a usual kid one, as it often is, it's better to **assume it may be related to NBD.** That will lessen the adults' frustration and lead to better problem-solving vs. emotional responding.
14. To avoid emotionally engaging and escalating into a power struggle, try to use **process and empathy statements** rather than debating content. For example, if the issue is toothbrushing, a process statement would note the avoidance ("you really want to get out of brushing your teeth"), and an empathy statement would note how much the child dislikes taking the time or feeling the sensations of tooth-brushing. Engaging with the content would involve debating the merits of toothbrushing or confronting the lying about it.
15. Teachable moments are usually **after** the meltdowns and emotions have subsided.
16. It is okay to give incentives for kids to accomplish things that are a challenge for them; tasks may be challenging because of skill deficits, multi-step sequences, the length of time and effort required, or sheer dislike. **This is not bribery.**
17. Don't give a command unless you have the energy and time to back it up at the first instance of disobedience—**wait to ask** until you can follow through. Otherwise, you are training noncompliance.
18. The mantra of "always be consistent in following through with consequences" applies only if you were rational and gave a punishment that fit the crime. If you were too angry, you need to admit you were wrong and change to more appropriate consequences. The **consistency** in parenting is in thinking of your child's best interest, not in rigidly holding to what you said in an angry moment.
19. Consequences may not **make** the child do what you want; you lay out the incentives, visual structure/schedule, and response cost strategies, and the child makes his/her choices. Their choices are not within our control.