

Resource Article

Teaching Children to Wait

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Young children often have difficulty waiting for something they want or need. When they come from difficult and unpredictable living situations, they do not expect to get what they need. This can cause them to demand attention by behaving inappropriately.

To understand this behaviour, think about the experience of a baby with caring parents. The baby is hungry, so she cries. Her mother may have to delay the feeding for a few minutes. She may pat the baby and say, "Soon" in a soothing voice. Soon the baby is fed. The baby learns that her needs are usually met within a short time. As the baby grows and becomes a toddler, he can learn to wait for food while mother is cooking by showing him the food being prepared.

Learning to wait continues through childhood. If the child wants to go somewhere with his mother, his mother may say, "I will be ready to go with you soon." The child knows that he will go with his mother soon, so he can wait.

But a child who is vulnerable or at-risk due to poverty, ethnic tension, abuse, or any difficult circumstance may not learn to wait. Her needs often cannot be met as soon as she thinks they should be. There may be issues that prevent the caretakers from feeding her. She may have parents who do not care. The child may feel hungry and react frantically. She is not sure her need for food will be met soon, if at all.

Insecurity about food often leads children to use negative ways to get immediate attention. A child learns that a tantrum gets attention or that threatening others causes them to do what he wants. Even though the attention may be negative, he feels this is better than being completely ignored.

You can help children learn to wait by planning activities that teach waiting. Be sure you can provide the promised reward. For example, have a small treat you can offer the children after they complete a game or activity that requires taking turns. Both taking turns and waiting for the reward will help them to learn to wait.

Demonstrate the importance of waiting by using activities that teach waiting without creating feelings of anxiety or panic. These include waiting for water to boil, food to cook, or the sun to go down.

To illustrate the value of waiting, help the children plant 2 seeds in 2 pots labelled "Patient" and "Impatient." The "Patient" seed should be watered regularly, and the soil should be left undisturbed. The "Impatient" seed should be watered and dug up every few days to see how it is doing. Ask them which seed they think will sprout first.

Praise patient behaviour in a cheerful, matter-of-fact way. Say things such as "Thank you for waiting so patiently" and "You are really good at taking turns." Phrases like these reward the learner and reinforce your message that waiting is rewarded.