Teachable Moments: How to Help Your Child Avoid Meltdowns

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Does this sound familiar? Your children are playing in the living room while you clean up the kitchen. You answer the phone, and a few minutes later, one child is angry and screaming because someone took her toy and the other is in tears because her sister hit her. It is in escalated moments like this that parents often find themselves trying to teach rules or give long explanations. Unfortunately, in moments such as this, your child usually is not even hearing your words let alone learning the rule. This is not a teachable moment.

There are countless teachable moments daily when skills can be taught and emotions discussed, such as during play time, in the car, at bath time or while reading together. As a parent, you can reduce challenging behaviors such as hitting, biting, pushing and whining when you 1) concentrate on calming your child during a challenging behavior incident and 2) wait until an appropriate teachable moment to actually teach your child.

Think again about the scenario when you are on the phone and your children are fighting. Below are several examples of how you could use teachable moments throughout the day to reduce the chance that the challenging behavior occurs in the first place.

Teachable Moment #1 – During morning reading time, read the book Hands Are Not for Hitting by Martine Agassi. For additional activities to do with this book, go to http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html#booknook.

Teachable Moment #2 – During breakfast time, intentionally teach the skill of sharing by saying, “Thank you for sharing the syrup with your sister!”

Teachable Moment #3 – When your children are playing on the floor quietly, sit on the floor, make eye contact and say, “Wow, you girls have been playing for 10 minutes quietly! Tell me about what you are building.” This teaches the desired behavior of playing quietly together.

Teachable Moment #4 - When the phone rings. Put the phone down, tap both girls on the shoulder and say, “I am going to be on the phone for 10 minutes. When this timer is done, come tap me on my leg and show me the timer.”

Practice at School

At school, teachers prepare students to solve social problems in appropriate ways before problems occur. Teachers use role playing, puppets or circle time to discuss emotions and possible solutions. Teachers provide opportunities to practice and reinforce skills during class. For example, children may practice how to trade a toy at circle time with a puppet. Later, teachers can complement a child when they see him trade during play time. “Wow! You remembered that when a friend is using a toy, you can ask him to trade!” Teaching skills in advance gives children the confidence to successfully manage a situation and allows caregivers the opportunity to praise a child for making a wise choice.

The Bottom Line

Young children are learning in every moment. They are actively discovering the world around them. You are always teaching your child. Strolling in the park, reading books and giving her a kiss before bed all teach her about her world. You can use the many calm and happy moments in your day to intentionally teach expectations, rules and skills that will help your child be successful and reduce challenging behavior.