

WORKING WITH A SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILD

EPISODE 13



Key Principles

- Managing yourself
- Appropriate attention
- Expectations and encouragement

MEET... Laura, David and seven-year-old Mathew, a child with Down syndrome. Laura and David, who want Mathew to become as skilled and independent as possible, don't want to underestimate what Mathew is capable of doing. They are trying to set appropriate limits and establish reasonable expectations that take into account his special needs while ensuring he develops as fully as he possibly can.



Managing yourself

In this episode, we meet parents who have high hopes for their special-needs child. They invest a lot of effort in helping their son develop and learn. Careful self-management, though, is a key ingredient in the success of these efforts. In cases where a child has special needs, parents sometimes monitor a child so closely he doesn't have an opportunity to form his own ideas, learn from his own mistakes, or internalize the satisfaction of accomplishment. While it can be difficult to pull back, parents who do can help their special-needs child become more self-aware and self-regulating.

Appropriate attention

In earlier episodes, we've looked at how giving children attention for annoying or uncooperative behavior can actually encourage them to be more annoying or uncooperative. For the child who wants to be recognized in the group—and all children do—being scolded is better than being ignored! Sometimes, though, parents can give too much positive attention, or at least it can seem as if they do. For example, if a parent wants a child to become self-motivated, giving rewards and encouragement at every little step can actually undermine the parent's goal. The child can come to depend so much on the parent's comments and encouragement, she might become uninterested or unmotivated to do something on her own. On the other hand, if her parents' involvement helps her think about the enjoyment she gets from an activity, she is more likely to participate for the fun and satisfaction. Fostering this kind of self-regulation in a child, whether he or she has special needs or not, has the added benefit of fostering cooperation and minimizing the potential for power struggles. A child whose parents are involved and encouraging, but not overly controlling, has little reason to try to turn the tables and control her parents by engaging in power struggles.

Expectations and encouragement

Positive expectations and encouragement go hand-in-hand to help children feel competent and resourceful. In *Episode 12*, we looked at how understanding your child can provide clues to ensuring that he has constructive ways to participate in the family group. By watching closely for clues to help you understand a special-needs child, it is possible to tailor expectations so they are appropriate to her interests and capabilities. When a child is doing something she is interested in and can succeed at, providing lots of encouragement is easy. Not only can parents comment on the child's efforts and results, they can comment on the child's enthusiasm and satisfaction. This helps the child develop self-awareness and internal motivation. In addition, when the expectations parents have for a child are realistic and based on an understanding of the child's needs and interests, it is easy for the child to live up to expectations. All around, a win-win situation.



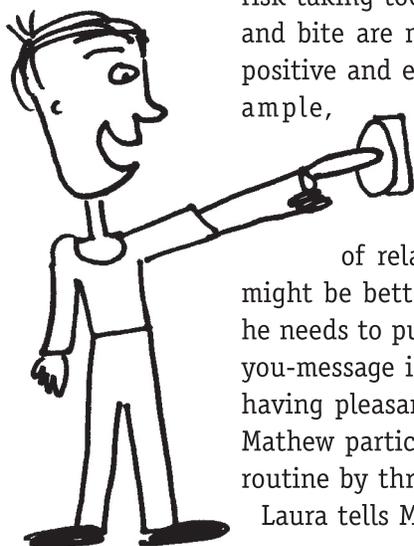
A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Managing yourself

Making Room for Mathew

In an effort to help Mathew develop as wide a range of skills as possible, Laura and David pay close attention to everything Mathew says and does. They take time to guide him as he learns important daily-living skills like eating with silverware. They also spend time each night teaching him learning-readiness skills. This concern and effort are clearly paying off. Mathew is participating in family life and learning about letters and numbers. However, by monitoring Mathew so closely, his parents risk taking too much control of Mathew's activities. At dinner, nearly every swallow and bite are monitored and commented on. And while many of the comments are positive and encouraging, they are designed to tell Mathew what to think—for example,



The "Parent Attention" button can be a handy addition to any household.

that taking a bite of food was a "good choice." To encourage Mathew to have his own ideas about what he is doing, Laura and David can try asking him questions instead of describing his behavior. Mathew also seems to be very good at understanding the dynamics of relationships and quite successful in getting attention for behaviors it might be better to ignore. When Mathew holds his milk in the air, Laura tells him he needs to put it down. This kind of constant close monitoring and Laura's use of a you-message is an invitation to a power struggle. Instead, Laura and David can try having pleasant dinner conversation, to draw the focus away from Mathew and let Mathew participate in a relaxing dinner. Later in the evening, Mathew disrupts the routine by throwing himself off the couch when Laura says it is time for ice cream.

Laura tells Mathew to make a "good choice," but Mathew continues to roll around on the floor. Laura and David spend a fair amount of time trying to get Mathew to stand up so he can have his ice cream. If Mathew doesn't get ice cream, he is certainly getting lots of attention from his parents. He is clearly in control of this situation. If Laura and David were to simply manage themselves at times like these, by

getting ice cream only for themselves, Mathew would probably quickly learn to manage himself appropriately. Withdrawing might be hard for two parents who are so committed to monitoring and rewarding their child. In the long run though, it will pay off as Mathew begins to make more responsible choices for himself.

Appropriate attention

How 'Bout a Chance to Try It on His Own?

Mathew gets lots of attention. His parents guide him through every activity, large and small. At dinner, they monitor when and how much he eats—for example, holding his milk out of reach when he wants it and asking him to “use his words.” They spend time working with him after dinner on skill-building activities, and have a reward system of Xs in place to help track Mathew’s progress. It is easy to understand why Linda and David focus so much on activities that will help Mathew fit in at home and, later, at school. But are they also perhaps doing him a disservice by making him such a focus of attention? Mathew’s activities and rewards are so tightly controlled, it doesn’t leave him much room to explore his own interests and find activities that he finds satisfying and rewarding for their own sake. Certainly, the positive attention Mathew receives from his parents is an important ingredient in his obvious competence and success. A next positive step Laura and David can take will be to encourage Mathew’s interest in activities without such elaborate external rewards. Laura and David can continue to give lots of positive attention, but shift it so it focuses more on Mathew’s own assessment of his experience. For example, instead of telling Mathew he made a “good choice,” they can ask him how it feels to try a little of everything on his plate. Does he like the flavors? What does he like best? In addition, at times when Mathew is pushing the limit as he did about furniture-jumping and ice cream or disrupting routines as he did at bedtime, Linda and David can simply withdraw or sidestep to ensure that Mathew doesn’t suck them in to giving him attention for being uncooperative.

Expectations and encouragement

What Would Mathew Like to Do?

Linda and David have high expectations for Mathew. They want him to have the life skills needed to succeed as independently as possible, and they have both spent time helping him, for example, learn to use silverware properly. They are preparing him for school by having a study session each night after dinner. They encourage him by telling him frequently he is doing a good job and making good choices. They also offer incentives (filling his chart with Xs, watching videos and having ice cream) to motivate him. These high expectations and varied encouragement techniques have

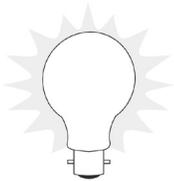


helped Mathew master many skills and develop a sense of competence. There is danger though in relying heavily on external rewards. When David and Linda offer ever greater rewards, they risk communicating to Mathew that they’re not sure he can do the work. Their approach has the potential to send the message that a huge effort, worth many Xs, must be made to accomplish a task. In the long run, Mathew will be better served if he learns to complete tasks because they are fun and rewarding. Linda and David can look for activities Mathew seems to enjoy even when a reward is

not available. By making these more available to Mathew and integrating them into his learning activities, Linda and David can broaden Mathew's interests, increase his self-motivation, and help him master new skills. As Linda and David tune into more interests of Mathew's and provide opportunities for him to explore those interests, they can let him move forward without constant monitoring. They can still provide encouragement and show their interest by asking questions that help Mathew evaluate things for himself.

Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Help children develop their own sense of accomplishment.
- Convey positive expectations.
- Avoid giving attention to misbehavior.
- Play, but avoid disrupting routines.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. Are there ways in which you might monitor your child more than is necessary? If so, during the next week pull back and focus, and comment, on what your child is doing well. For example, if you often remind your child to eat items on her plate, try not to. Instead, comment on how well she is doing when she does eat something. Check the results in a week.
2. During the next week, watch your child closely. Watch for both appropriate and inappropriate behavior. At the end of the week, pick one inappropriate behavior and try to come up with a way to provide an appropriate outlet. For example, did your child use color crayons to make a mural on the long wall in the hall? Get some large pieces of paper and tell her she can color to her hearts content on the paper. Tell her you think wanting to color big things is great, and that now she has a place where she can do it whenever she wants.
3. Do you use rewards a lot to get your child to cooperate? If you do, try to restructure a required activity so it becomes fun or interesting for its own sake. For example, if your child is supposed to help set the table but resists, turn it into a game. Write the names of each piece of silverware on a slip of paper and have her draw a slip. After the item on that slip is on the table, draw another until the table is set. Give high compliments for a job well done and for playing the game so well.