Learning New Behaviors Can Be Fun

“The Personal Space Game”
(To be played after mastering The Arm’s Length Game)
by Catherine Faherty, www.catherinefaherty.com

SKILL TO LEARN:
The concept of physical “personal space.” How to respect personal space between you and another person.

NEW UNDERSTANDING:
I know what “personal space” means. To respect someone’s personal space means to stand approximately an “arms’ length” away from him or her.

EXAMPLE SITUATION:
The child may be reminded to “respect other people’s personal space” but still make mistakes by standing too close. He or she may not understand the abstract concept of personal space.

This strategy helps make learning about personal space fun instead of exasperating or frustrating. By being specific and concrete, the teacher or parent is providing literal meaning to the idea of “respecting people’s personal space.” So when you say, “Respect personal space,” it will have clear meaning and the child will better understand the behavioral expectations. The directions below are meant for a classroom teacher, although they can easily be tailored for home use.

MAKE A GAME OF IT:
You will modify The Arm’s Length Game to make it into The Personal Space Game. First write a Social Story about personal space, explaining why it is important, and explain that personal space can be determined by using an arm’s length as a general and approximate measure. You will summarize by literally and concretely defining “personal space” as an average “arm’s length”.

The Personal Space Game is almost identical to the previous game, except that the cards will contain only names of people, along with a specific action. And once the child is standing the proper distance from the person whose name was written on the card – giving personal space - he will DO something. For example, he should give a “high five” or shake hands, or offer a greeting.
Eventually, you can accompany the game with more information about personal space and/or greetings. For example, make a list of which phrases can be said to kids (“S’up?”), and which phrases for adults (“Hi, how are you?”). For interested older children or teens, you can teach the cultural differences in personal space from one culture to another; and learn greetings in different languages.

If at home, follow the same procedure, including all the participating adults and children in the home to find the average arm’s length, and follow the same instructions as above.

Depending on the child and his/her responses, you may have to provide additional information to clarify a certain aspect. Assess as time goes on. For example, you may need to teach about “approximately” when measuring arm’s length. By his responses to these activities, you will know what to change, add, adapt.

These games help make learning about personal space fun instead of exasperating or frustrating. By being specific and concrete, you are providing literal meaning to the idea of “respecting people’s personal space.” So when you say, “Respect personal space,” it will have clear meaning and the child will better understand the behavioral expectations. For a while, when not playing the game, you might have to say “Respect person space...like in the game!” until this behavior is generalized to other situations when not playing the game.

***REMEMBER: Write Social Stories about being first, order or doing things, line order in school, etc. Social Stories may expand your child’s understanding of the bigger picture. Teachers and parents are encouraged to be trained in writing Social Stories. Authorized training in Social Stories is available through Catherine Faherty. See catherinefaherty.com