

BREATHE: To be Successful in the Community

Excerpt from *Encouraging Positive Behavior Outside the Home* by Sheri Wilkins

As communities begin to open, and there are more opportunities to venture out and about, parents will want to fine-tune their behavioral techniques to ensure that family outings are fun and not frenzied!

When planning for excursions outside the home, it can be helpful for parents to remember to BREATHE! Of course, you'll want to actually, physically breathe, but for our purposes, BREATHE stands for:



Begin by Clarify Expectations: Many families find that three general expectations that work across situations and time are: Be safe, be responsible, be respectful. These expectations are general enough to be adaptable to any situation and they can be further defined to clarify behaviors appropriate to a specific environment or activity.

Reinforce Positive Behavior: One thing to keep in mind about reinforcement is that it can be a very effective way to teach desirable behavior. For reinforcement to work in this way, it is important to remember to tell your child why they are being reinforced. Instead of saying “Good girl,” tell your child why they are receiving the praise by saying, “Thank you for being responsible by picking up your trash and throwing it away in the trash can.” Linking the reinforcement with the desired behavior increases the probability that you will see more of the positive behavior in the future.

Expect the Best: Before going out, reiterate the expectations and the reinforcement system and let your child know that you have confidence in their ability to meet the expectations. Be positive and encouraging and let your child know that you are committed to helping them have a good time and be successful.

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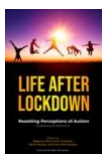
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Anticipate Challenges: Before you start, think through possible problems that could arise. Think about what might go wrong and how you can prepare ahead for those contingencies. If the new environment might be loud and the noise might result in dysregulation for your child, what are some tools you might have available? Perhaps you could pack some noise-reducing headphones to have on hand if needed. By thinking through what challenges might occur and planning ahead for how you will respond, you'll feel much less stressed and will have a greater likelihood of success.

Take Breaks, If Needed: Understand that returning to the community and pre-pandemic activities may require learning new behaviors and coping strategies. In situations where masks are required and social distancing is expected, it is normal to feel an urge to get away to take a breath and regroup. Before leaving for an activity, discuss with your child that it is ok to need to take a break, how to signal the need for a break, and what the break might look like.

Have a Sense of Humor: Understand that even your best planning may not prevent a behavior incident from occurring. Have fun defining and describing your expectations and developing your reinforcement system. Enjoy reinforcing your child's appropriate behavior and make sure to let them know that you're appreciative of their efforts. Even if things don't go exactly as planned, choose to see and celebrate the positives!

Enact an Escape Plan: Finally, take some time to plan out how you will respond if your child becomes dysregulated and needs to leave the activity. Think through how you might exit as easily as possible. It might be helpful to enlist the help of family or friends to support you in exiting the location or activity if needed. Don't look at a need to leave as a failure. Instead, focus on what went right, what you learned, and what you might do differently the next time.



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