How to Nanny Successfully with Difficult Children

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Nannies often find themselves faced with caring for difficult children with little or no experience in how to deal with the child. You must remember that the primary importance should be insuring the health/safety of the children, and keeping your own sanity while doing it.

Certain behaviors children exhibit are signs of an underlying problem or situation. Some behaviors can be redirected or ignored until the child has grown out of a phase. Other behaviors such as biting, hurting animals and children are so detrimental to themselves and others, that they cannot be ignored and must be dealt with immediately. Other attention-seeking behaviors such as tantrums, whining and screaming, holding their breath, refusing to eat, or refusing to talk etc. are all behaviors that sometimes stem from causes that can be remedied.

There are steps involved in curbing difficult behaviors of the children in your care.

1. Determine the cause of the behavior(s)
2. Determine the developmental level of the child(ren) and whether the behavior is characteristic of that developmental age
3. Talk to the parents about the behavior(s) and methods they have used in the past to subside those behavior(s)
4. Brainstorm with the parents on possible measures you both can take to minimize or eliminate those behavior(s)
5. Talk to the child(ren) directly about their behavior(s) and see if the child(ren) can offer possible causes or solutions to their behavior
6. Set your rules as a nanny for the children

Determining the cause of the behavior(s)

To determine the cause of a behavior, careful unbiased observation is required. Keeping a journal is often extremely helpful. Record days, times and the activities and environment at the time of the behavior(s), each time they occur. This seems a bit scientific, but it helps the nanny try to figure out the trigger of a particular behavior, and this can help reduce the behavior(s) by being prepared when those same patterns are occurring.

Example: Arnold has a history of biting, and kicking. During the week the nanny keeps a journal of when he starts doing this. She finds out over a week time period that whenever he hurts someone, it is usually right before lunch, or when he is outside.

Irritability is a major cause of some behaviors in children. To reduce the behavior, a nanny could just make sure the child has eaten and is hydrated before he plays, and reschedule his playtimes for a different time during the day when he is less irritable.

Other common causes of behaviors are: the children lack limits and structure in their lives, the children have too many limits and structure in their lives, the children lack the attention they
need, the children are getting too much attention and being fawned over, boredom is a huge factor in some children, and sibling rivalry/competition/jealousy.

Sometimes it helps to spend time with the family outside of your nanny hours, to see how the family interacts with the children. Is there a certain aspect of the relationship that seems to provoke any of the behaviors from the children when they are home? How do the parents react to it?

**Determining the developmental level of a child and whether the behavior is characteristic of that developmental age.**

Some behaviors are typical of a certain developmental age. Nannies should have some knowledge of child development before taking a nanny position to recognize developmental milestones. A child's *developmental age* may not be the same as their *chronological age*, which may be a factor in and of itself. Often a child developing more slowly than their peers may display trigger behaviors in predictable circumstances. For example, a child who is not as physically developed as his/her peers may exhibit disruptive behaviors in gym class. A child who has cognitive developmental delays may show behaviors when learning new things.

If a behavior is a typical one of a certain developmental level, then the child will naturally grow out of it and the nanny, as well as parents, just need to be patient. When a normally developing 2 year old suddenly starts saying “no” all the time and refuses to do things, that is a normal stage of developing independence. Or when a normal 3 ½ year old begins talking to themselves constantly, they are not insane, that is normal during play.

**Talking with parents about child behaviors and finding out what methods they have used in the past to subside those behaviors.**

The parents have lived with the children longer than the nannies in most cases, and may know exactly what to do in a certain situation. They may never have thought to tell nanny how to handle a situation, because they may not realize the child is acting a particular way around the nanny. They can't help if they aren't aware of the problem. Or the parents may not have even noticed the problem, and can pay more attention to the behaviors when they occur next time. Sometimes, teachers can help in this area as well by observing behaviors at school.

**Brainstorm with the parents on possible measures you both can take to minimize or eliminate those behavior(s)**

All parents have their own parenting style. Most parents prefer the nanny to use the same parenting style and have similar childrearing philosophies, but to make a family-nanny relationship work that is safe and healthy for the children as well as the nanny, open communication and brainstorming is necessary.

The parents may be just as frustrated with a behavior as the nanny. If they are, they may be more open to additional suggestions from the nanny, particularly if the nanny has been around other children in the past and has experience with what may work, or not work. Consistency is very important in changing a behavior, whether the nanny conforms to the parent's style or the parent's conform to the nanny's style. So, if the parents and nanny don't act in a *consistent*
manner when a behavior occurs, the child won’t learn anything except, “this is what mommy and daddy will allow and not allow” and “this is what my nanny will allow or not allow”. It is best if the nanny and parents can agree to and consistently implement the same strategy for dealing with the difficult behavior.

Talking with parents about their children is a touchy subject, because the children are their children and not the nanny’s. Sometimes, parents are unwilling to implement any strategies for dealing with difficult behavior. The nanny may decide to implement her strategy anyway. Nanny has the right to expect certain baseline behaviors by the children in her care (please, thank you, no hitting/pinching/hair pulling, indoor voices and outdoor voices for examples). Nanny must establish and enforce rules to maintain the children’s health/safety and his/her own sanity. However, the nanny is not likely to change the way a family does things, or change a child or parent’s personality. And be advised, certain ‘strategies’ such as spanking should NEVER be used by a nanny, no matter WHAT the provocation.

**Talk to the child(ren) directly about their behavior(s) and see if the child(ren) can offer possible causes or solutions to their behavior**

There are times when you shouldn’t discuss a child’s behavior with them directly, because once you take notice of it, they may do it on purpose to get attention or get a reaction. So, use this measure with caution, and as a last resort if the children are younger than 7 or so.

However, some children may surprise you and open up and tell you what the problem is. They may tell you *exactly* what you need to know. Then you can talk about it together to find ways of working the problem out. For example, Raina has been throwing tantrums at naptime. Upon being confronted, she tells the nanny she is having nightmares about monsters and scary clowns. So, before naptime the nanny knows to plant “happy thoughts” into Raina’s mind, and be more understanding when she procrastinates at naptime.

**Set your rules as a nanny for the children.**

The nanny has an absolute responsibility to keep the children safe and healthy. If a child is doing something that hurts another child in a nanny’s care, or may hurt him/herself while in the nanny’s care, then a nanny has an obligation and the right to set limits for the children. If a nanny feels it is unsafe for a child to stand on his/her chair, or run around the house carrying scissors, or to play in the street, then the nanny should set her own rules, to keep the children safe. The other thing to consider when a nanny states her rules, are her own sanity. An unhappy nanny is unlikely to be a happy nanny around the children, which is not good for the nanny or the children.

Children in daycare have rules designed to keep all children safe and healthy and keep the teachers sane. Nannies can have rules too. Toddlers and preschoolers are NOT too young to learn these rules. Some rules can be: walking feet only in the house, tell me before you leave the yard, only scream if you are hurt, be nice and gentle to each other etc. Children will probably react best to rules phrased in a positive way, rather than a negative way. For example, try to avoid saying, “No running, don’t leave without telling me, don’t scream if you aren’t hurt, don’t hit”.
How to set the rules and make them stick

- Sit the children down and talk to them (very early on when you start the position) and tell them what the rules are, and why.
- The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be to stop the behaviors.
- If you are caring for children who have been in preschool or older, they may be able to ‘tell’ nanny the rules. The more the children participate in the setting of the rules, the more ownership they have to them.
- A rules chart often works well for the preschooler through elementary school child.
- Sit down and explain the rules to guests when they visit. This both informs the guest and reinforces the rules to the children in the nanny’s care.
- Tell them the consequences when they break a rule.
- Physical punishment should never be an option.
- Time outs (1 minute for every age they are is the general rule) or stopping an activity they are engaged in, or removing a privilege, etc.
- Follow through with consequences every single time.

Children will throw the biggest “fit” the first couple of time you follow through, it is inevitable. However, the more consistent you are, the more they understand that the nanny is not a pushover. Difficult children are masters at testing their limits. But kids are adaptable, once they have tested and established those limits, they are more likely to abide by them. Most children need some limits and structure.

Make sure the parents know what your rules are. Parents will seldom disagree with a rule if the rule keeps their children safe, even if they don’t use the rule when the nanny is not there. If the parents do disagree with the nanny about a rule, the nanny should explain why it is important. The nanny is 100% responsible for the safety and well-being of the children in her care, and is entitled to set reasonable rules of conduct to insure their well-being.

Communication between nanny and parent is key. Make sure the parents know when the child has misbehaved, and when he/she was redirected or received a time out or had a privilege taken away. Keeping a daily journal or log for the parents is something a nanny should keep anyway to update the parents of what their children have been doing while they weren’t home.

If the nanny still feels the situation is not improving and it is unsafe or unhealthy physically or emotionally, for the children or nanny.

After all measures have been taken, and nothing works and the nanny feels she cannot keep the children safe, or feels so unhappy that it is affecting her job performance, then she should tell the parents and find another family to work for. Some family-nanny relationships just clash due to personality differences or child rearing philosophy differences that don’t become clear until after some time has passed.

Sometimes, a nanny cannot curb the behaviors herself without the parents’ support. If the child is treated one way at home with a nanny, and another way while with their parents, sometimes it is nearly impossible to help the situation. A nanny cannot change a family. This is why it is important that the family and the nanny have similar philosophies of childrearing in the beginning.
The nanny must adapt to the parents’ philosophy of childrearing, but within reason. When it affects the children's health and safety, and the nanny's job performance, the nanny should follow the above steps to improve the situation. After all, the goal of childcare, is to help them grow into happy, healthy, safe, friendly, productive, responsible, and independent adults.