



# Children's Center

Bridgewater State University January/February 2011

## Responding When Children Test Rules for Behavior

by Karen Stephens, director, Illinois State University Child Care Center

"Why does she challenge everything I say or do?! I say sit and she runs. I say run and she sits!"

Does this sound familiar? All children test their parents. We were all kids once and from time to time, we, too, challenged rules. In early elementary school, I remember singing songs in bed at night. (Anything to fend off sleep!) I knew just how many, "Stop singing and go to sleeps!" I could get by with. The sound of Mom's magazine being briskly plopped down onto the sofa was my cue to shut up and shut up quick. Hey, I was ornery, but not dumb.

I'm not sure how long that nightly two-step went on. I don't remember doing it intentionally to rile mom. Unconsciously, I just sang right up to her boundary line. Through many interactions, mom taught me her limits and

I'd learned not to cross them. But I admit, I'd toe right up to the edge of them on occasion. Exasperating kid, wasn't I — yet typical.

Limit testing like that is a proverbial parent-child separation ritual. It's an age-old tug-of-war between a child's desire for more freedom and need for dependence on parents.

Even when you do everything "by the book," kids challenge rules. They go beyond ethical bounds and push you to your absolute limit of patience. Kids often pick public battle grounds to launch a show-down. (Toy aisle at the store ring a bell?)

Asserting individual freedoms, balanced with the needs of the larger group, is a tightrope humans walk every day. Parents get a ringside view as children embark on the journey. The job of parents is to help children handle freedom while at the same time teaching them to abide by basic social rules. It can be pretty intimidating.

Children sometimes resist rules as a way of searching out their personal identity. It's easiest to rebel against those who are closest to you; this makes parents and caregivers handy prey. (Ask any adolescent!) We can't demand children always agree with us. If we did, how could they think of themselves as autonomous individuals? But we can require children to abide by reasonable rules that are intended to ensure and promote their well-being.

Challenging authority is normal, even healthy. But too much rebellion is stressful for parent and child alike. It can be a sign of problems related to children's emotional or social development. It can reflect a poor parent-child relationship. It can indicate children are feeling confused, anxious, or insecure. Children may feel they are getting so little attention that they act badly to get you involved. When children continuously second guess you and engage in testing behavior, it's a sign that you need to be a more predictable, clear, and firm parent.

We all know basic rules are good for children. They provide stability, structure, and security. But remember, children don't need robots or computers for parents; they need responsive, caring, thinking adults. There are times when being flexible with rules is reasonable and wise. But if you find yourself always giving in, you've turned your parenting power over to your children. It's a power they're not ready to handle.

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### Dates to Remember

**February 21 - Monday**

Closed for Presidents' Day  
(no university classes)

**February 23 - Wednesday**

Monday class schedule  
(Wednesday classes will not meet)

**March 7 - 11**

Spring Break (no university classes;  
offered as an optional week)

**March 11 - Friday**

Children's Center closed for  
professional development

Self-portrait  
by  
**Victoria**



# Curriculum Notes - Investigator Group

by Dan Anderson, teacher

## Happy Birthday:

Lucas	2/21
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The Investigator teachers had a very restful and wonderful winter break, and we hope that all the children had a restful time off as well. It looks like the children were as eager as we were to get back and see all their friends.

The Investigators were very excited about our December theme which was Under the Sea. On our trip in the ocean, we explored the deepest depths, shallow coral reefs and the warm sands of the beach. We discovered all different kinds of animals in many shapes and sizes. The children enjoyed imagining what it would be like to walk on the ocean floor or be attacked by sharks in our yellow submarine. The Investigators' favorite animals included the shark, dolphin, and puffer fish. The children loved decorating our classroom with many of their beautiful sea creatures, like paper plate octopuses and clay sea animals. We had a blast learning about some of the animals with whom we share our oceans!

When we came back from our winter vacation, the children were very interested in the weather outside so we started the semester off with a Winter theme. We learned all about penguins, that polar bears don't hibernate, and what happens to animals during winter time. The children discussed the signs of winter, how ice forms, and what cold feels like. Some of our favorite art projects included using shaving cream to make a blizzard and making penguin paper bag puppets. It was a very fun theme, and we were "fortunate" to have a lot of snow to play in and examine.

## Reminders:

Although it has been difficult getting onto the playground with all the snow, the children really enjoy going out, and we believe the exposure to fresh air helps combat illness. Please continue providing proper snow attire for these treks outside.

This year we will be celebrating Valentine's Day on Monday, the 14<sup>th</sup> and Tuesday, the 15<sup>th</sup>, so everyone can be involved. We have a special snack, songs, and activities planned for those days. As explained in our earlier letter, all children will have opportunities at the center to make cards for family and friends, so please do not feel obligated to provide cards for your child to bring to school. Those who choose to bring cards can place them in their friends' cubbies or boxes in the morning.



# Curriculum Notes – Explorer Group

by Joanne Hogan, teacher



## Happy Birthday:

Seth	1/08
Madison	1/10
Kaelyn	1/16
Ava	2/16

Happy New Year! The spring semester has begun and everyone has returned from a long and hopefully relaxing winter break. After combining our two classrooms for the optional weeks, we are ready to get back to our regular routines and would like to extend a warm welcome to our newest Explorers: Leela, Anasuya and Erik. We look forward to spending time with these new children and their families.

All of the wintery weather that we've experienced lately made our theme of *Winter Wonderland* an obvious choice. The children enjoyed painting with colored ice cubes, painting snow with water colors, making beautiful snowflakes to decorate the classroom,

exploring snow in our sensory table, dancing to "Freeze Dance," and experimenting and making predictions about ice at our science table. After discussing our favorite winter activities, the children were very excited to play in the snow on our playground. Our picnic table became a snow fort and it was fun to swing on the swings and drag our feet in the deep snow.

Outdoor play is a large part of our curriculum and is very important in the gross motor development of young children. Please make the assumption that your child will be going outside every day and provide them with snow pants, boots, gloves/mittens, a weather proof jacket, and a hat. In the event that it is too cold to go out, we will provide large motor activities for the children in the BSU gymnasium or our movement room. Be sure to check our bulletin boards for photos of the children enjoying their time in the snow!

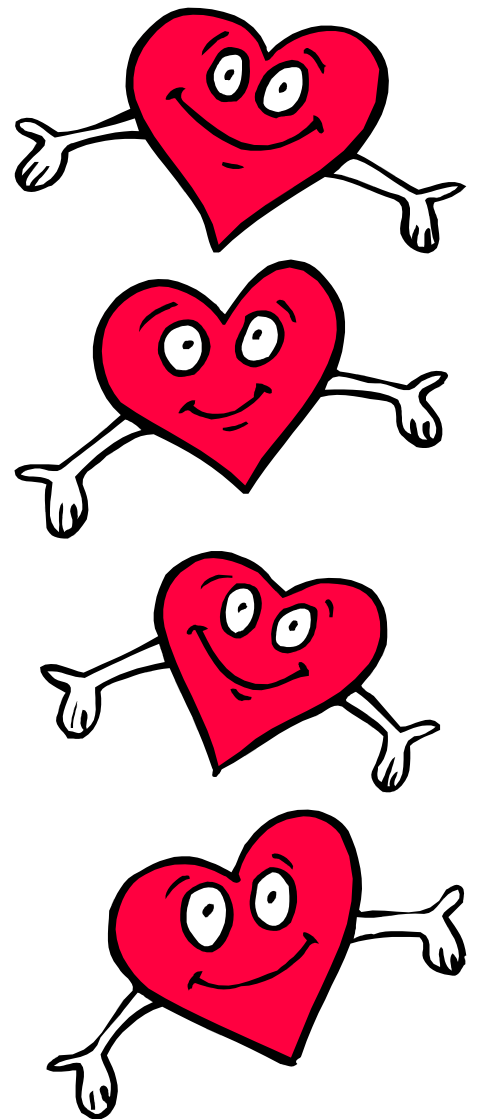
This semester, we are fortunate to have Dr. Sarah McQuarrie, a BSU music professor, join us on Tuesday mornings. She has been working with the Investigators for the past year, and we are grateful that she is extending her time so that the Explorers can experience some new music activities as well. We would also like to thank Dr. Greg Nelson for continuing to provide age appropriate math activities for the children on Thursday mornings. Being located on campus certainly has its advantages and we are happy that the children can enjoy some new experiences that they may not receive elsewhere.

Some of you may know Caitlin Mulcahy, who began working as a teacher assistant at the Children's Center last September. This semester Caitlin will be completing her student teaching experience in our classroom. She is wonderful with the

children and, with time, she will become more involved in the planning and implementing of our curriculum. We look forward to working with her over the course of the semester.

## Note:

Valentine's Day will soon be upon us. Keep an eye on your parent mailbox for details about our related classroom activities.



## Responding When Children Test Rules for Behavior

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If your child challenges you excessively, be on the safe side and seek help from family members or child care professionals who are knowledgeable and compassionate. The following may be helpful, too. They are tips for communicating rules to children in a firm, respectful manner.

- Establish rules that are understandable and age appropriate.
- Maintain self control when stating rules. Yelling, turning red in the face, and tightening the jaw simply tells children they have taken emotional control over you.
- Address behavior in a calm, direct, and matter-of-fact voice. It should not be a singsong sweet voice or a high-pitched shrill. Use a slightly lower voice than you use in daily conversation. This is a signal that you are serious and expect compliance.
- Bend to child's level and make eye contact. State your expectations clearly and simply. Phrase them positively. "You may put the toy on the shelf now."
- Tell children what consequence will occur if they don't change their behavior. "You won't be able to watch television until your toys are picked up."
- Enforce a consequence immediately if your child disobeys. Say what you mean and mean what you say.
- Enforce consequences consistently regardless of your mood or energy level.
- Never phrase an expectation as a question. For instance, "It's time to go take a bath now, okay?" The "okay?" infers the child has a choice. It's hard to break the "okay" habit! If you must say something, say "Do you understand?"
- Call children on their game when they try to distract you. For instance, after being told to put away toys your child may grumble, "I hate you!" The child is trying to push your emotional button. Don't give in to it! I've seen parents respond by groveling to children in a syrupy, singsong voice, "Well I love you, honey bunch." Then they pick up toys for

the child! Instead, respond unemotionally by saying, "That is not the issue. I expect the toys to be picked up when I come back."

- Occasionally make regular conflicts less personalized by creatively motivating compliance. For instance: "I'm setting this timer to 5 minutes. See if you can pick up your toys before it rings." Preschool teachers signal clean up time by singing the same song every day. Give it a try; it can work at home, too.
- Include children in making rules. When you do, they are much more likely to comply with them. For instance, ask, "How can we prevent people from tripping at night when they go to the bathroom?" Since children are usually the ones getting up, they will see that the rule about putting toys away is for everyone's safety.
- When you make a decision, don't continue haggling. Inevitably you will be rebuked with a "That's not fair!" Here's your response: "I understand you don't feel it's fair, but I've made my decision." Of course, high spirited children will rebound back with, "Why do YOU get to make the decision?" The answer is simple: "Because I'm the parent."
- If all else fails, cross your fingers and carry a four-leaf clover. But by all means, hang in there! A better day is bound to be just around the corner . . .

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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