Children learn behaviors through a variety of means, including observation/modeling, association, and consequences (Deblinger & Heflin, 1996).

In general, children can use these mechanisms to learn both positive and negative behaviors. However, observation, association, and consequences also explain how violence or abuse related behaviors are learned.

**Observation**

Children learn many behaviors by simply observing others. For example, parents may find their children attempting to apply lipstick, shave with a razor, or wear high heels—all behaviors they have learned by observing parents, adults, or older children in their lives. They imitate both positive and negative behaviors that they observe. Children often mirror their parents’ behaviors, which is why some parents might say, “She’s just like me. She has my friendly way with people” or “He’s just like his dad. He speaks to me in a very disrespectful manner.” Children who observe others hitting someone, whether real or on television, are likely to engage in the same behavior. The child is likely to hit his or her parents, siblings, and classmates. These are all behaviors that may be learned through imitation. Behavior can be changed or unlearned.

**Association**

Children also learn through association. For example, when a parent physically disciplines or abuses a child, this behavior is often accompanied by unpleasant comments made with a loud tone of voice. Children who have these experiences may learn to expect to be hit when someone raises his or her voice. This association may only be unlearned or broken if the child no longer has experiences in which screaming results in being hurt. Until then, the child may fear being physically hurt every time someone expresses him- or herself with a very loud or harsh tone. Unfortunately, due to this association, children sometimes react with aggression to loud or seemingly harsh voices that are not intended to be threatening. Because of this learned association, children who have experienced physical abuse may react to loud voices with aggressive behavior in an effort to protect themselves. This association can be broken when children begin to feel safer and learn from positive experiences that loud voices are also often associated with positive feelings like enthusiasm when participating in or observing an exciting sports match.

**Consequences**

Children also learn from consequences that follow their behaviors. When children receive praise and other rewards for their behaviors, they are likely to repeat those behaviors. Conversely, if children receive more attention, lecturing, and reprimanding for negative behaviors, such as poor grades, acting in a disrespectful manner, or talking back, children are likely to repeat these behaviors. Parents sometimes inadvertently teach their children that negative behaviors are the most powerful strategy to gain their parents’ attention. It is therefore important for parents to show their children that their positive behaviors gain more of the parents’ attention. Remember that parents play a very powerful role in helping their children to increase appropriate prosocial behaviors that may replace problematic behaviors, such as aggression, name calling, tantrums, and the like by consistently showing interest and giving attention to positive behaviors.