

Behavior in Early Childhood

What's Inside...

- ◆ **Developmentally Appropriate Behavior**
- ◆ **Prevention Strategies**
- ◆ **Intervention Strategies**
- ◆ **Parents as Partners**



Behavior is one of the most common words parents and early childhood professionals use when discussing a child with or without a disability. Usually perceived as a challenge or inappropriate, many “behaviors” are actually typical of a developmental stage. From birth to five, children learn the social emotional skills, coping strategies, and emotional regulation skills to develop positive relationships with adults and other children. Kindergarten teachers hope that children enter their classrooms with these social emotional skills and the appropriate behaviors needed to socialize with their peers and function in a classroom.

When we talk about challenging behavior, what does that really mean? The “formal” definition of challenging behavior actually has three components. It **interferes with the child’s** learning, development, and successful play. It is **harmful to the child**, other children or adults. It puts a child at **high risk** for later social problems or school failure. For many of us however, challenging behaviors are those that really “get under our skin.” Also referred to as “button pushers.” Or in other words, the behaviors that some children display that really bother us the most. We must remember that these behaviors are not only challenging for caregivers and teachers but also for the child. But with some valuable information and strategies, we can help these children develop emotional awareness and the skills they need to get along with others and succeed in school.

SOURCE: Kaiser & Raminsky 2007

Why do Children Misbehave?

All behavior is a form of communication. There are three main reasons why a child may misbehave. They are; **to avoid/escape a situation or person(s), to obtain** an object or attention, or **to change the level** of stimulation. Or a combination of two or more of these reasons. Many children use challenging behaviors because it works for them and they really have not learned any other way to act yet. The longer a child uses that challenging behavior to get their needs met, the harder it is to change the behavior in the child. Our goal is to help them find more effective ways of getting their needs met in a more appropriate way. Therefore, we should base our interventions and strategies on the reason **why** they are using the challenging behavior and not the behavior itself. We have to respond to each child individually.

Risk factors and protective factors also contribute to a child’s behavior.

Temperament


Within the biological risk factors, temperament plays a key role in how children interact with their world. The temperament that a person has helps to shape the personality they develop as well as the relationships they foster. Research has consistently found a robust association between temperament and challenging behavior (Frick & Morris, 2004; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Dimensions of temperament include activity level, mood, intensity of reaction, and persistence. Understanding a child’s temperament can help reframe how adults interpret children’s behavior and the way adults think about the reasons for the behaviors. Understanding children’s temperament and how adults approach and interact with children can lead toward more positive and successful steps towards reducing challenging behavior.

3 Main Types of Temperament

- ⇒ *Easy* (40%)
- ⇒ *Slow to Warm* (15%)
- ⇒ *Difficult* (10%)
- ⇒ *Mixed* (35%) -Children who have two or more of the 3 types

SOURCE: Thomas, Chess & Birch; 1968

Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Biological <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temperament • Language skills 	Biological <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temperament • Self-regulation • Meeting developmental milestones
Environmental <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family • School Environment • Community 	Environmental <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure Attachment/ Relationships • Goodness of Fit • Family • Access to resources


Developmentally Appropriate Behaviors	Red Flags
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Very little self control ◆ Act and react naturally without the ability to stop themselves ◆ Separation anxiety 	<p style="text-align: center;">Infants (Birth-1 year)</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Difficulty calming themselves ◆ Cries for long periods of time ◆ Doesn't show affection towards their caregiver

Before babies can even use words to tell us how they feel or what they need, they communicate through their actions: facial expressions, sounds, and body movements. From birth to age one, babies exhibit behaviors that are developmentally appropriate. With the guidance from their caregivers, infants begin to manage their feelings and reactions. They will gain increasing control over their own bodies. For example, an initial behavior of screaming when they are hungry develops into gesturing toward the baby bottle. Which can then be seen as crawling to the refrigerator where the bottle is and then as they reach about 1 year, the child is asking for the “ba-ba.” These are appropriate behaviors for children of this age. It is when these young children exhibit the red flags, that we need to stop and decide, is this developmentally appropriate for this age and the individual child.

SOURCE: EHSNRC; 2006

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ View themselves as the “center of the world” ◆ Can be very possessive ◆ The word “No” is a way to assert their independence ◆ Easily frustrated when they can’t do things they want to do ◆ Temper tantrums are very common ◆ Emotions can be very intense but short lived ◆ Test his/her limits ◆ Not sharing with others 	<p style="text-align: center;">Toddlers (12-36 months)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Excessive crying and irritability ◆ Limited range of affect and emotion ◆ Inability to recover from distress ◆ No demonstration of developing self-regulation
---	--	--

For toddlers, certain age appropriate behaviors become much more evident. Knowing how to help toddlers learn to manage their own behavior and get along with others needs to be one of the roles of the teacher or caregiver.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Needing approval, reassurance, and attention ◆ May become fearful when separated from parents or caregivers ◆ Generally easily consoled and can adjust to new environments within a few minutes ◆ Personality and emotional control develop ◆ May increasingly argue with you to justify their wants and ideas 	<p style="text-align: center;">Pre-school (3-5 years)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Persistent and unreasonable crying ◆ Excessive fears ◆ Extreme withdrawal ◆ Minimal looking to adults for approval ◆ Minimal attempts to communicate wants and desires ◆ Persistent irritability ◆ Temper tantrums
--	--	--

As preschoolers get older they start to understand how to behave in social situations. It is our job to model the behaviors we want in our children, give them the skills to interact with others, and to identify and validate their feelings.

Whether the behaviors we see are developmentally appropriate or a cause for concern, our teaching decisions need to vary and adapt to the age, experience, interests, and abilities of the individual children within a given age range.

SOURCE: Mid-State Early Childhood Direction Center Developmental Checklist Birth to Five; 2012

Video: Temperament as Behavioral Style- www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgXwCqzh9B8

Prevention Strategies

There are four aspects of prevention that are important in early childhood programs. They include observation, reflection, quality practices, and positive attitudes. Knowing your children each as individuals through careful **observation** helps to anticipate situations that might lead a child to use challenging behaviors. You can plan your responses to challenging behaviors appropriately when you know how to interact with the child. Through your observations you can become familiar with the “signs” that the child is exhibiting when they get frustrated, angry, overwhelmed, etc. You can also help them to recognize these signs in themselves. Educators also need to think about the importance of reflection in their programs. You really need to think about what we do and **WHY** we do it. Being flexible and remembering that every child and every group of children is different. Think about what is going well in your program and what could use some improvement. Always have patience with yourself and the children you work with.

When we talk about quality practices we are referring to various aspects of the program that should be looked at for developmental appropriateness and quality. These are described in the blue box below. Another part of preventing challenging behaviors is to have a positive outlook for **EVERY** child and to start each day with a clean slate. *Your attitude means everything!*

Daily Routines- When transitions and routines are well planned, consistent, engaging, and individualized, children gain the sense of safety and trust they need to explore the world.

Environment-The environment includes all of the outdoor and indoor play spaces and all the people, toys, materials and equipment in them. It is where children eat, rest, play, build relationships, and learn. When the environment is welcoming, reflective of families and cultures, and addresses the interests and skill-levels of all children, they feel valued and supported.

Caring Connections-Caring connections are the bonds created between adults and children and between peers as they talk, learn, and play together in healthy, loving ways. Caring relationships are fostered through nurturing practices and are the basis for building a safe, strong, and caring community in which everyone is accepted and ready to learn.

Activities and Experiences-Activities are the intentional, planned events designed to engage children and support learning. Unplanned learning experiences (often child-initiated) can also build on interests and expand children's understanding.

Partnerships Between Teachers and Families-Home and school partnerships are the connections between important adults in early childhood settings and the homes in which the children live. When early childhood providers and families work together, children are more likely to succeed in school and in life.

Respect Cultural Values-Culturally responsive teaching helps build connections between what children already know and what they need to know. Learn as much as you can about the particular cultures in your classroom. Get to know the child and their family.

SOURCE: The Devereux Reflective Checklist for Teaching Practices is part of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Preschool Program

Intervention Strategies

Intervention strategies refer to planned responses that help you to respond more effectively to challenging behaviors. They enable you to teach the child rather than punish him/her. The strategies can also help you build your relationship with the child. There are several things to consider when picking a strategy to work with a child's challenging behaviors.

Does the strategy...

- Address the function or feelings behind the behavior
- Help to strengthen your relationship with the child
- Help the child learn to control his/her emotions
- Help to make long-term changes in the child's behavior
- Help the child to become a problem solver

- **Redirecting**
⇒ Offer the child a choice for a more positive outcome
- **Effective Praise**
⇒ Should be personalized and describe effort, occur close in time with the behavior
- **Planned Ignoring**
⇒ With students that are not posing a danger to others, you simply ignore their behaviors and continue instruction without stopping or giving them any special attention

SOURCE: Devereux Center for Resilient Children

Other Strategies

- Other strategies to consider exploring are peer partnering, positive “time-in”, FLIP IT, relaxation techniques, social stories, as well as others.
- When dealing with challenging behaviors we must remember that a child is driven by emotion and when they are out of control, they do not hear anything you say. Reasoning will not work with the child.
- As caregivers, we need to remain calm and be aware of our own body language.
- After the child has settled down, find the right time and place to talk where you won’t be interrupted, acknowledge the child’s feelings and use your words carefully.



Sources

Kaiser, Barbara & Raminsky, Judy S. (2007) Challenging Behavior in Young Children, Person Education Inc.

Thomas, Chess & Birch (1968). Temperament and Behavior Disorders in Children. New York, New York University Press.

Early Head Start National Resource Center—EHSNRC (2006) Strategies for Understanding and Managing Challenging Behavior in Young Children: What Is Developmentally Appropriate and What Is a Concern? Technical Assistance Paper No.10.

Mid-State Early Childhood Direction Center Developmental Checklist Birth to Five (2012) <http://ecdc.syr.edu/resources/checklists/developmental-checklist-lista-verificacion-del-desarrollo/>

Devereux Center for Resilient Children - www.centerforresilientchildren.org

Looking for more copies of this bulletin? You can download it from our ECDC website or contact us.

Mid-State Early Childhood Direction Center

Syracuse University
370 Huntington Hall
Syracuse, NY 13244-2280

Phone:

315-443-4444

1-800-962-5488

Fax:

315-443-4338

E-mail:

ecdc@syr.edu

<http://ecdc.syr.edu>



Over 35 Years
Caring for All Children

Workshops of Interest

The ECDC can provide information and workshops on a variety of topics tailored to the interests and needs of parents and early childhood professionals. Resources are available on such topics as general child development, developmental issues for children with special needs, coping strategies, and specific disabilities.

Workshops include:

- Including All Kids
- Parent Partnerships
- Developmentally Appropriate Practices
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- Supporting Social Emotional Development
- Challenging Behaviors
- Moving On: Transitioning Families (EI-CPSE) & (CPSE-CSE)
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education?
- What is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
- Writing IEP Goals
- Getting Ready for Kindergarten

Who We Are

The Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) is a regional technical assistance center for the State Education Department providing information, referral and support to families, professionals, and community agencies concerned with young children birth to five. We are located at Syracuse University’s Center on Human Policy.

ECDC services to families are free and confidential.

ECDC Staff

Maria Gill, Project Director
Laura Glover, Early Childhood Specialist
Rachael Zubal-Ruggieri,
Communications Coordinator