



What We Say to Children: The First Step to Managing Challenging Behaviors

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Preschool and child care providers are faced with addressing challenging behaviors exhibited by the children in their programs. Over the past decade early childhood educators have reported a marked increase in the number of children exhibiting challenging behaviors as well as an increase in the intensity of the behaviors. These behaviors interfere with children's ability to relate to their peers, disrupt the learning environment, and sometimes pose health and safety issues. For some families, these behaviors limit their access to child care and/or preschool. In many cases, preschool and child care providers are not equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to address these behavior issues.

A first step to meeting the needs of children exhibiting challenging behaviors is to examine adult interaction styles and create a supportive environment. To do this providers should reflect on three aspects of adult behavior:

1. **attitudes and expectations**
2. **verbal interactions with children**
3. **responses to children's behavior.**

This article will review strategies within these areas as the first step to managing challenging behaviors. It is important to recognize that while these strategies will not eliminate all challenging behaviors, they can help to create a positive environment for all children, resulting in a reduction of some behaviors. As a result, providers have the opportunity to focus on specific children and the implementation of individual behavior plans to reduce problematic behaviors.

**Attitudes & Expectations That Provide
a Foundation for a Positive Environment**

• *An attitude of respect for children's feelings is essential in establishing a positive environment.* Adults can respect children's feelings while at the same time making clear and direct statements about expectations, being consistent with consequences, and enforcing standards for behavior. When adults acknowledge children's feelings and the resentment that may arise when enforcing rules, children are more likely to respond appropriately and power struggles can be avoided.

• *Being consistent and firm is important in establishing a predictable and secure environment for children.* Children understand expectations and standards for behavior when the behaviors are consistently and firmly enforced. The credibility of adults is enhanced when they firmly and calmly follow through on directions provided to children and predetermined consequences for children's behavior (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

• *Offering alternatives for inappropriate behavior assists in establishing a supportive environment for children.* When children display inappropriate behavior, an appropriate alternative behavior is offered and reinforced (i.e., "Walk when you are in the classroom," or "Use your words"). When possible, provide alternatives that meet the child's need, but in a more appropriate way.

• *A positive environment is one that accommodates children's individual differences.* An attitude of flexibility is key to accommodating individual differences. Flexibility regarding children's participation in activities can reduce power struggles and allow adults more time to interact with children. Individual children can be allowed to refrain from participation as long as it does not present a danger to that child or disrupt the other children. Requiring all children to participate in all activities at the same level is unreasonable.

Verbal Interactions

Providing Directives

When adults are faced with managing challenging behaviors in an early childhood program, it is important to take a close look at the verbal interactions and the manner in which directives are provided. Some problems can be avoided and others more easily managed by incorporating the following guidelines for giving directions and stating limits to children (Peter et al, 1992).



• *Be specific and clear when giving directives.* Children need to know precisely what is expected. They are more likely to respond appropriately to "Keep your feet on the floor" than "Be careful."

• *Avoid using questions you do not mean to ask.* Use question cues only when you mean to provide a choice. A direct cue, such as "Jason, please wash your hands," is preferable to "Jason, will you wash your hands before snack?"

• *State directions positively.* Asking a child to "Walk in the classroom" is clearer and more positive than "Don't run."

- *Avoid repeating directives.* Repeating directives can become troublesome because children quickly learn that they are not expected to respond the first time they are given direction.
 - *Avoid attributing needs to children.* Frequently telling children what their needs are can be condescending and intimidating. Using simple and direct statements such as "Please sit down" can be more effective than "You need to sit down," or "I need you to sit down"(Katz & McClellan, 1997).
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Providing Feedback to Young Children

Adults should provide frequent, accurate feedback to children about their behavior. This feedback should be given individually and should reflect a ratio of four positive encouraging statements to one correction statement and/or consequence. This ensures that the majority of feedback provided to children is of a positive nature and creates an overall positive tone in the classroom.

Responses to Children's Behavior

Guidelines for Delivering Effective Praise and Encouragement

Effective praise and encouragement are both terms that refer to the positive comments adults give children to encourage appropriate and desired behavior. Keep in mind that praise can be overused and that the goal is for children to be self motivated and able to monitor their own behavior. The following guidelines can be used for delivering praise and encouragement consistent with this goal (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988).

- *Be specific rather than general.* The child needs to know precisely what he or she is being praised for. It is more effective to say to a child "You put away your toys," rather than merely saying "Good job."
- *Individualize to each child.* Adults should vary the praise and encouragement they give to children. Select things that are unique to you and/or the child.
- *Repeating the same words decreases their effectiveness.* Avoid overusing phrases such as "Good job," or "Good work." Praise and encouragement should be geared to each child's level of understanding and interest. For example, it is important to use short sentences with a child who has a low level of receptive language.
- *Point out and use natural reinforcers whenever possible.* For example, an adult may say "You put your toys away so you will not miss any outside time, " or "You used your words to ask for the truck, so Steve shared his with you."
- *Be enthusiastic and sincere.* Establish eye contact with the child and show enthusiasm in your praise and encouragement. Convey to the child that what they are doing has value. Be yourself. Children know when adults are being insincere in their comments.
- *Initiate praise and encouragement whenever possible rather than waiting for the child to request it.* Praise and encouragement initiated by adults has a greater effect than child initiated praise. For example, it is more effective to tell the child "You worked very hard on that picture, " before the child brings the picture to you to solicit a response.

- *Focus on improvement and effort rather than the outcome or product.* For example, say "You must have worked really hard to use all those colors," rather than "That is a beautiful picture you made."
 - *Avoid competition and comparison among children.* Adults are often unaware of the subtle ways they inadvertently encourage competition and comparisons between children. For example, comments such as "Whoever cleans up first gets to be the line leader," or "Let's see who can build the highest block tower" encourages competition and comparison.
 - *Help children develop an appreciation of their own behavior.* Comments such as "You did that all by yourself. I bet that feels good," helps children recognize their own behavior.
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Delivering Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback is used to let a child know when a behavior is not appropriate. The most common form of feedback is verbal. Corrective feedback should always be supportive of the child and focused on the undesired behavior (i.e., "It is not okay to hit Sally. If you want to play with her toy, you need to ask her"). The goal of correcting children's behavior is to teach appropriate social skills not to punish the misbehavior. The following guidelines can help adults focus on the correction of children's behavior as opportunities to teach (Peters et al, 1992).

- *Deliver corrective feedback as soon after the inappropriate behavior as possible.* This will help the child associate the inappropriate behavior with the corrective feedback. Gain the child's attention before delivering the feedback. It is important to have the child's attention in order for the feedback to be most effective. Establishing eye contact with the child is one way to ensure you have the child's attention.
- *Acknowledge and express respect for the child's feelings.* Children need to know that their feelings are valid and need to have their feeling acknowledged. For example, after a conflict the adult might say, "I understand that you felt angry with Steve, but it is not okay to hit him"(Katz & McClellan, 1997).
- *Feedback should be specific and clear.* Remember that children think in a concrete manner and do not always draw conclusions in the same way as adults. Children need information given to them in specific and clear terms. For example, saying, "Please don't hit me. If you want my attention, you can tap my arm lightly" is more effective than saying, "Stop it."
- *The feedback should provide whatever assistance the child needs to perform the appropriate behavior.* For example, if an adult asks a child to put away some blocks at the block area and the child starts to leave the area without completing the task, the adult might tell the child, "Not quite, please put some blocks away before you go to snack" as he/she is guided back to the block area. If the child still does not comply, the adult may have to physically assist or prompt the child to put the blocks away.
- *Always end on a positive note after providing verbal feedback and assistance.* In the block example above, if the child goes back to the block area and puts away some blocks without further assistance the adult may say "That's better. Thank you for putting the blocks away."

Summary

The strategies presented here have proven to be effective for creating a positive and supportive environment in the presence of challenging behaviors. Although implementing these approaches to interacting with children is the first step in creating a positive environment for all children, it will not be the final step for many children. Individual behavior plans may be needed for children who continue to exhibit persistent challenging behaviors. Early childhood care and education providers are encouraged to request assistance from behavior and/or mental health specialists in the development of individual behavior plans.

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