

High-quality Guidance Policies

An Essential Tool for Addressing Challenging Behaviors

by Sarah Garrity and Sascha Longstreth

"I don't think that I can take it anymore. I really love working with the children, but these behavior problems are so frustrating.

Yesterday, James pushed over the dollhouse during nap time and woke up half the children. I feel like all I do all day is try to keep the children safe."



Sarah Garrity, Ed.D, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Child and Family Development at San Diego State University and was a practitioner in the field of early care and education for almost 20 years as a teacher,

administrator, and literacy coach. Her research involves the exploration of how best practices are implemented in the field, with a focus on continuity of care, positive behavioral support, and programs serving culturally and linguistically diverse students. Her research aims to increase understanding of the research to practice gap by exploring the socio-cultural and linguistic complexities of educational settings.



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experience in a variety of educational settings. She has worked with the YMCA, Head Start, and Polinsky Children's Center to train early care and education teachers on topics related to infant and early childhood mental health. Dr. Longstreth's research is closely connected to her teaching practice, and she is currently investigating the quality of discipline policies in NAEYC-accredited programs across the nation. She has also investigated teachers' perceptions of continuity of care and is deeply committed to the exploration of practices that support children's developing social emotional competence.

"Today Emily hid under the climbing structure and refused to come inside after outdoor play, which threw our whole schedule off.

This is not why I decided to become a teacher. I wish we had more support with how to deal with challenging behaviors in the classroom."

In our experience working with teachers of young children, we have heard many comments such as these. Here we define challenging behavior as *any repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with children's engagement in social interactions and learning*. These behaviors include physical and verbal aggressions, prolonged tantrums, property destruction, self-injury, noncompliance, disruptive vocal and motor behavior, and withdrawal (Powell, Fixsen, & Dunlap, 2003). Both teachers and administrators report that dealing with children with challenging behaviors is one of the most difficult aspects of their job, and often leads to burnout, stress, and the decision to leave the profession. In addition, children identified with aggressive behavior in preschool are more likely to continue experiencing behavior problems as they get older (Campbell, Spieker, Burchinal, & Poe, 2006; McCartney et al., 2010).

What steps can directors take to ensure that practices designed to prevent and address challenging behavior are implemented in classrooms?

High-quality guidance policies (also referred to as discipline) are a good place to start. Policies are an essential part of effective service delivery and are used to help translate program goals into practice. Research in K-12 settings over the past 35 years has consistently shown that discipline policies that are systemic in nature and are understood, accepted, and consistently enforced by administrators, teachers, students, and families are related to fewer instances of challenging behaviors (e.g. Brown & Beckett, 2006). High-quality discipline policies are developmentally appropriate, grounded in research, and allow programs to build an infrastructure that promotes a social climate conducive to learning and academic success.

The Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC) was created to assist directors in the development of guidance policies that reflect what research tells us is best for children. Developed through an extensive review of the literature in the fields of general education, special education, early care and education, early childhood special education, educational administration, and school psychology, the TAGPEC has been shown to be effective in assessing the quality of guidance policies (Garrity, Longstreth, Salcedo-Potter, & Staub, 2015; Longstreth, Brady & Kay, 2013).

■ It is grounded in the belief that all children should be treated with dignity and respect and that the role of the teacher is to teach appropriate strategies for expressing emotions and solving problems.

■ It promotes the use of preventative practices that teach children appropriate strategies for solving conflict, in contrast to traditional approaches to discipline that are typically reactive in nature and involve punishing children for misbehavior.

■ The TAGPEC is an easy-to-use 28-item checklist that describes nine essential features of high-quality discipline policies for programs serving children birth-8 years of age (see Resources).

By incorporating the nine essential features of the TAGPEC into guidance policies, directors can build an infrastructure that supports both teachers and children. An overview of the nine features of the TAGPEC can be found below.

Nine Essential Features of the TAGPEC

1) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reflect an instructional, proactive approach to behavior guidance that supports the learning and practice of appropriate pro-social behavior.

Guidance policies need to emphasize the importance of teaching social norms and desired behaviors, positively acknowledging pro-social behavior in ways valued by children, and providing children with multiple and continued opportunities to use and practice those behaviors. Early childhood professionals can indirectly and directly support the learning and practice of positive behavior. Indirect guidance strategies such as those related to environments, curriculum, and classroom rules. Direct

guidance strategies include: 1) prompting children in naturalistic contexts and using natural and logical consequences (e.g. “Pablo, I see you have finished your drawing. We will be ready to go outside when you put the crayons away.”); 2) modeling; 3) redirection; 4) rehearsing and role-playing; 5) giving children choices (e.g. “Sierra, I can’t let you tear the pages in books. This is the second page you have torn today. You will need to make another choice instead of the reading corner. You may go to the block area or the art area. Which do you choose?”); and, 6) acknowledging and reinforcing positive behavior when it does occur. Additional ways in which pro-social behavior can be taught include:

■ positive commenting:

“Joshua, you are such a kind friend. It made me feel so happy today when I saw you share the bucket with Micah when you were playing in the sandbox.”

■ asking children to brainstorm ways in which they can be responsible members of the classroom community:

“Let’s make a list of all of the things that we can do to make sure we take care of our classroom.”

■ helping children work through difficult situations:

“Roberto and Jackson, I know that everyone wants to play with the new motorcycles in the block area. Let’s practice how to ask for a turn.”

2) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should identify primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and intervention practices for promoting pro-social behavior and reducing challenging behavior in young children.

Research suggests that adopting a continuum of prevention and intervention practices in early childhood programs results in positive outcomes for young children, their families, and the profes-

sionals who work with them (Dunlap, Fox, & Hemmeter, 2004; Forness et al., 2000). Primary practices focus on the use of specific adult-child interactions and environmental arrangements to teach and support pro-social behavior in all children. Examples of primary strategies include the provision of engaging and meaningful environments and curricula and responsive, respectful interactions between teachers and children.

For example, if Miss Maria knows that transitioning from free play to circle time is particularly difficult for Abdi, she may arrange for her teaching partner to show Abdi the pictorial schedule while she helps another group of children clean up the dramatic play area.

At the *tertiary* level, early childhood professionals and families work collaboratively to define the challenging behavior of individual children, collecting contextually relevant information (e.g. what happens immediately before and after the challenging behavior occurs, information about family routines) and jointly developing a plan to teach desired behaviors and decrease the problem behavior (Dunlap, Fox, & Hemmeter, 2004; Forness et al., 2000; Sugai & Horner, 2002).

When working in the classroom described above, Sarah noticed that the preventative, primary strategies related to environment, routine, and curriculum were sufficient for many of the children, who quickly became engaged with classroom materials and internalized expectations and routines. For a small group of children, however, the use of secondary strategies were necessary to prevent and address challenging behavior. In this instance, Sarah worked with the teacher to collect documentation on when the challenging behavior occurred (time of day, setting, and frequency) and examined screening and assessment results to develop second tier strategies that intentionally targeted identified challenges. Finally, when data indicated that primary

and secondary strategies were not sufficient, a behavior plan was developed for two of the children in order to provide more intense, individualized support.

3) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should describe clear and consistent expectations for behavior.

Clearly written behavioral expectations help to ensure that ‘everybody’s on the same page’ and create a unified vision for socially-valued behaviors. Guidance policies should describe behavioral expectations that are short and stated positively, letting the children know what they should do rather than what they should not do. Common behavioral expectations in early childhood classrooms include ‘be safe,’ ‘be kind,’ and ‘be responsible.’

For example, a toddler teacher might tell a toddler who throws away her plate after lunch time, “Lucinda, I like how you are throwing your plate away. You are so responsible!” while a teacher of preschoolers may facilitate a circle time discussion about what it means to be responsible for the classroom garden. Conversely, if a toddler hits another child and grabs her toy, the teacher can say, “Veronica, hitting Serena is not kind. We need to be kind to our friends and use our words when we want to play.”

These behavioral expectations can easily be translated into classroom rules that are both appropriate and meaningful for children of all ages.

For example, a teacher working with preschoolers can use the behavioral expectation of ‘be safe’ to develop classroom rules that will ensure adults’ and children’s safety in the classroom and outdoors.

4) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should describe behavioral expectations that are developmentally appropriate and essential to social and academic success.

Expectations for behavior need to be appropriate, reflecting the natural learning abilities typically associated with the age groups of the children.

For example, while most toddlers engage in hitting, kicking, pushing, and shoving for short periods of time, these are age-appropriate behaviors for children who are still learning the rules of social interaction. When behavioral expectations are stated positively (“Be safe”), teachers can describe to children what this looks like across settings and support the development of self-regulation and other social-emotional skills.

5) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should recommend evidence-based and developmentally appropriate guidance strategies for promoting pro-social behavior and reducing challenging behavior.

Young children thrive when provided with a predictable schedule and consistent routines. When coupled with an organized environment and a hands-on, engaging curriculum that reflects the children’s interests, the stage is set for children to be successful. An example of this comes from Sarah’s experience as a literacy coach. A teacher approached her about behavioral concerns in the classroom, and during her initial observation, Sarah noticed that all of the furniture was pushed up against the walls, leaving a big open space in the center of the room. Indeed, several children were running and wrestling in this large open space. She then looked at the classroom schedule and saw that several of the children arrived at the center at 5:00 in the morning. (This was a center that served working parents of low-income means). In addition, a 40-minute circle time followed breakfast, and Sarah observed that many of the children were fidgety and disruptive during this teacher-led activity.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Sarah and the teacher rearranged the classroom environment to create learning centers and clear pathways that signaled how children were to use the space and curbed their ability to run and wrestle. The classroom schedule was also changed to allow the children to go outside following breakfast, and when the children returned inside at 10:00 am, they were ready to participate in a shorter, more child-centered and collaborative circle time.

6) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should emphasize the importance of sufficient and active adult supervision of all children.

Acceptable adult-child ratios for young children, birth to 8, have been described by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) and stated by early care and education licensing agencies. Listed are some additional considerations:

- Working with children with challenging behaviors or children with disabilities may require additional adults or a smaller group size to ensure that all children’s needs are met.
- Guidance policies should emphasize the importance of active adult supervision. Early childhood professionals need to be actively engaged with and/or observing young children at all times.
- Teachers should use data about children from multiple sources (e.g. observations, screening and assessment results, parent input, Individual Family Service Plan/Individual Education Plan) to anticipate and plan for possible settings and events that may trigger behavior challenges.

For example, if Miss Maria knows that transitioning from free play to circle time

is particularly difficult for Abdi, she may arrange for her teaching partner to show Abdi the pictorial schedule while she helps another group of children clean up the dramatic play area.

7) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reflect the family-centered nature of early childhood education.

Schools that implement strong family involvement programs have fewer discipline problems. If a guidance policy makes reference to parents only as recipients of information, for example:

“Parents will be contacted when an undesirable behavior pattern develops and suspension may be necessary,” it can impede the development of positive, proactive, and authentic collaborative relationships with families.

Making sure that parents are aware of behavioral expectations before problems arise can be done by communicating behavioral expectations in the parent handbook and reviewing them during orientations. Many programs also post behavioral expectations as a visual reminder for staff, parents, and children.

Another way to adopt a preventative and collaborative approach with parents is to learn more about the child’s home environment and how behavior is handled at home.

For example, Margaret, a preschool teacher, described how 3-year-old Alondra was having difficulty in the dramatic play area. The problems centered primarily on a sparkly, purple purse that Alondra did not want any other child to touch — even when she was playing in another area. After observing Alondra’s behavior for a week, Margaret approached her mother and shared that that while Alondra enjoyed playing in the dramatic play area with the other children, she got very upset when another child tried to play with the purse. Alondra’s mother shared that prior to

coming to the center, Alondra, who was an only child, had been cared for by her grandmother and was not used to being around other children. She also said that she had been struggling with Alondra’s ‘feisty’ personality at home.

By working together, the teacher and parent were able to promote consistency across environments.

8) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should ensure that staff members have access to training and technical assistance in implementing policy guidelines and promoting the social competence of young children.

It is essential for teachers to have continued opportunities for improving knowledge of the development of young children, state early learning standards, and evidence-based, developmentally appropriate practices. Clearly articulating a goal of staff training and support within a guidance policy helps validate a program’s commitment to supporting teachers and children.

An example of this might be:

“We provide access to in-service training and technical assistance as an ongoing process of staff development, to inform and improve the skills of all staff in promoting the mission of our guidance policy and the social competence of young children.”

9) Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reference the use of a data collection system by which the relative success or failure of the behavior guidance policy will be evaluated.

Fortunately, many forms of data are naturally available to assist in the evaluation of policy effectiveness, including incident reports, numbers of contacts and parent conferences concerning challenging behavior, types of violations of behavioral expectations, and

the numbers of suspensions and expulsions. The use of data such as these will help programs identify if their policy is working and support them to engage in a cycle of continuous improvement.

For example, Sarah recently took part in a meeting with a Head Start director and her team in which they reflected on the effectiveness of their revised policy for supporting children with challenging behavior. By using data regularly collected as part of program requirements, they realized that the number of referrals for outside mental health consultation had dropped significantly from the previous year. In addition, they discussed how their focus on providing professional development related to the primary, preventative strategies described in Essential Feature 2, contributed to changes in classroom practices.

Smart Policies Create Effective Programs

Learning how to understand and manage emotions, use words to solve problems, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions are key developmental tasks of the early years. The TAGPEC is a promising tool that can be used by early childhood professionals to build a system of support for children, families, and teachers and guide programs in the development of policies that reflect evidence-based practices.

References and Recommended Resources

To obtain a copy of the TAGPEC for use in your center or to learn more about the tool, please contact the authors: sgarrity@mail.sdsu.edu or slongstreth@mail.sdsu.edu or visit their website: <http://go.sdsu.edu/education/tagpec/>

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