Managing Challenging Behaviors: Adult Communication As a Prevention and Teaching Tool

by Tom Udell and Gary Glasenapp

Using adult communication as a prevention and teaching tool

Over the past decade preschool and child care providers have reported a marked increase in the number of children exhibiting challenging behaviors. "Early childhood educators are generally not accustomed to seeing children who are extremely aggressive with peers; who are successful at resisting adult influence; who wear gang colors; and who bite, kick, and hit their teachers with clear intent to hurt." (Walker, 1999). These behaviors interfere with children's ability to relate to their peers, disrupt the learning environment, and may pose health and safety risks. For some families, these behaviors limit their child's access to child care and/or preschool services.

A great number of articles are found in the professional literature that are intended to assist preschool and child care providers to effectively address these behavior issues. Much of the writing focuses on the important role of the classroom environment in the prevention of problem behaviors. Issues such as the physical layout of the room, the placement of pieces of furniture, and the numbers and types of visual distractions are important factors impacting children's behavior (Dodge & Colker, 1996; Lawry & Strain, 1999). The instructional environment, including the daily routine, transition periods, time on task, and adult behavior plays an equally critical role in the prevention of problem behaviors. The remainder of this article focuses on adult behavior as a tool in managing challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms.

For purposes of this discussion, we are referring to "adult behavior" as: 1) attitudes and expectations; 2) verbal interactions with children; and 3) responses to children's behavior. This article will review strategies within these three areas that have been found to be effective in meeting the needs of children exhibiting challenging behaviors.

While these strategies will not eliminate all challenging behaviors, they can help to create a positive environment for all children and reduce or prevent many challenging behaviors. By becoming more aware of how the subtle aspects of their behavior impacts children, adults working in early childhood programs can become more effective in dealing with all children, including those exhibiting challenging behaviors. The following are specific strategies that providers can use to create such an environment.

Attitudes and expectations

An attitude of respect for children's feelings is essential in establishing a positive classroom environment. Adults can demonstrate respect for children's feelings while at the same time making clear and direct statements about expectations, being consistent with consequences, and enforcing standards

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for appropriate behavior. Children are more likely to respond appropriately and power struggles with adults can be reduced when a climate of respect and positive expectation is in place. This climate can be established when adults employ the strategies described below:

Being consistent and firm is important in establishing a predictable and secure environment for children. Children understand expectations and standards for behavior when the expectations for appropriate behaviors are consistently and firmly enforced. The credibility of adults is enhanced when they firmly, calmly, and consistently assist children to comply with directions and requests and follow through with pre-determined consequences for children's behavior (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Many effective early childhood programs train classroom staff on a set of uniform responses that all staff will employ in response to typical, inappropriate behaviors. Consistency of response across all staff provides a message to children regarding the predictability and security of the setting they are in.

Offering alternatives for inappropriate behavior assists in establishing a supportive environment for children. When children display inappropriate behavior, an appropriate alternative behavior should be offered and reinforced (i.e., "walk when you are in the classroom," rather than "no running in the classroom", or "use your words" rather than "no whining." A closer look at a child's inappropriate behavior (yelling) usually indicates there is a function for the behavior — either obtaining an outcome (getting the toy) or avoiding an outcome (having to pick up toys) (Reichle & Wacker, 1993). Assisting the child to engage in an alternative, appropriate behavior that functions to meet his needs is the key to long-term development of a repertoire of acceptable behaviors.

A positive environment is one that accommodates children's individual differences. In classrooms where adults value and demonstrate flexibility, individual differences are more easily accommodated. A review of child development tells us that it is unreasonable to expect all children in any given preschool classroom to participate in all activities at the same level. A one-size-fits-all approach will certainly result in teacher frustration and the exhibition of challenging behaviors by children. Flexibility regarding children's participation in activities can reduce power struggles and allow adults more quality interaction time with children. Individual children can be allowed to refrain from participation as long as they select an alternate activity that doesn't disrupt the group and has been pre-determined with the child.

Verbal interactions

Providing directives is one of the more common verbal interactions that occurs between adults and children in the classroom. The manner and quality with which adults give directives and verbally interact with young children can make a big difference in the kinds of behaviors exhibited by those children. Many problem behaviors can be prevented and others more easily managed by incorporating the following guidelines for giving directions and stating limits to children (Peters, Udell, & Doede, 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 statements only when you truly intend to provide a choice. A direct request, such as "Jason, please wash your hands," is preferable to "Jason, will you wash your hands before snack?"

State requests and directions in a positive manner. Asking a child to "Walk in the classroom" is more positive and more clearly understood than "Don't run."

Avoid repeating requests and directives. Repeating directives can become troublesome because children quickly learn that they are not expected to respond the first time they are given a direction. Adults do not want to inadvertently teach children that it is okay to ignore requests that are made of them.

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).

Providing Feedback to Young Children. The importance of adults providing positive feedback to children cannot be overemphasized; this is especially true when considering the role of adult verbal interactions in influencing a child's behavior — positively or negatively. When children receive meaningful feedback (praise, smiles, hugs, etc.) for assisting a peer to pick up toys, the likelihood of that behavior occurring again in the future is increased (Alberto & Troutman, 1995). Conversely, when an adult provides no notice to a child who has thrown himself into a tantrum when asked to pick up

toys, the likelihood of that behavior occurring again in the future is decreased. In order to maintain an overall positive tone in the early childhood classroom, the staff will be providing a ratio of four positive/encouraging statements to each corrective statement and/or consequence.

Responses to children's behavior

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, shorter sentences will be more effective 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 positive behavior.

Corrective feedback is used to let a child know when a behavior is not appropriate. The most common form of corrective 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, Udell, & Doede, 1992).

Deliver corrective feedback as soon after the behavior's occurrence 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 feelings 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 young 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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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Uniform responses? What's that?: Udell and Glasenapp report, "Many effective early childhood programs train classroom staff on a set of uniform responses that all staff will employ to typical, inappropriate behaviors." Do you have such a training program? If not, convene a task force of teachers to identify the common responses used effectively and develop training materials to make sure this information is passed on to new or inexperienced teachers.

Self-check #1: Use the list of guidelines for giving directions and stating limits to children as a self-check. After completing the self-check, pair teachers to discuss and reflect on the experience.

Self-check #2: Use the guidelines for giving praise and encouragement as a self-check. Then, have teaching partners observe each other for good examples of using the guidelines in the classroom. Provide time for teachers to discuss what they learned from each experience. Or, create an observation checklist from the list of guidelines and use the checklist as part of your teacher evaluation system.