

Behavioral Challenges in Early Childhood Settings

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Introduction

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Addressing children's challenging behaviors can be one of the most emotional and difficult activities you face in early childhood settings. We each bring our own beliefs and experiences to every situation, which can make being objective difficult at times. Inappropriate or emotional reactions to children's challenging behaviors can turn a potential learning situation for the children into an unnecessary crisis. Focusing on the children and on how to help them learn the skills they need to be successful, instead of focusing on our own feelings, is easier said than done, but it's important for us to strive toward. Children imitate behavior they see, so we must be able to model self-control and show children how we want them to act in times of conflict or frustration.

Although this Redleaf Quick Guide suggests strategies you can use for handling some of the most common behavioral issues of young children, it does not provide comprehensive recipes for responding to all situations. Children's behavior is complex and results from any number of causes, such as health, physical environment, temperament, experiences, skills, risk factors, and development. Therefore, all adults working with young children should participate in ongoing training about positive guidance for children. Administrators, teachers, drivers, monitors, substitutes, and volunteers can all benefit from learning more about helping children learn social skills and self-regulation.

Many Challenging Behaviors Represent Typical Development

We must remember that our expectations for young children's behavior should be reasonable for their age and developmental level. Often many of the behaviors adults find challenging are actually typical for certain ages and developmental stages. Children are learning vocabulary and how language works, so they do not always have the words to express themselves to adults or one another in socially acceptable ways. We like to think of childhood as a magical, carefree time. But instead it can be frustrating, because children have not yet learned many problem-solving or coping skills.

Children's emotions can be very intense. Children may not be able to control their feelings, so they need outlets for them and support in learning self-control. Although children may have a growing curiosity about others and the desire to have friends, the social skills guiding them toward knowing how to befriend one another are still evolving. Young children are very focused on themselves, seeing things from their singular points of view. They also have a naturally increased need to be independent, which can create disturbances in the routines of a group of children. Typically developing children may at some times exhibit every challenging behavior described in this book as they carve out their identities. It is the frequency and intensity of the children's challenging behaviors that can alert us to the idea that the behaviors may be outside the typical developmental framework, and that additional support may be necessary.

Developmental screenings of children may help to determine whether children have potential developmental delays or other issues that may impact behavior. Some programs offer developmental screenings, with informed parental approval, and others make referrals for screenings. Screenings, however, alert you only to possible issues of concern and should be followed up with more in-depth assessment if scores indicate a need. Even so, information from screenings may help guide action plans to best

support children in reaching their potential in all areas of development. Working together, families and teachers can provide the positive guidance and support needed to help young children through challenging times.

Remaining Calm through the Storm

As you use this book to work with children during challenging times, remember to remain calm. Remaining calm is your very best strategy in dealing with challenging behaviors. Don't become upset, raise your voice, or make threats. These techniques do not work and will make everyone involved feel more out of control. If you are calm, you will be better able to problem solve and to model appropriate behavior for children.

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Aggression

Observed Behavior

- Harming others through kicking, hitting, throwing things, pulling hair, or other aggressive actions
- Destroying property through kicking, throwing, stomping, beating, or other aggressive actions

Appropriate Response

The immediate goal is to keep the child from harming herself or others.

HARMING OTHERS

Infants and Toddlers

- When an infant hits or throws, it is not considered aggressive behavior. Redirect the infant by introducing a different toy.
- When a toddler exhibits aggressive behavior, place yourself between the aggressive child and others. At eye level, tell the child in a calm but firm voice to stop the aggressive behavior because it hurts others.
- Examine the victim to see if there is a physical injury. If there is an injury, follow your program procedures.
- Redirect all toddlers to soothing activities.

Preschoolers

- When a preschooler is aggressive toward another child, place yourself between the child who was aggressive and the victim. At her eye level, tell the aggressive child in a calm but firm voice to stop the activity. Suggest that she take some deep breaths to calm down.
- Tell the victim that you are there to help and ask if she is hurt. Examine her to determine if there is physical injury. If there is an injury, follow your program procedures.
- Once any injury is addressed, help the injured child use words to express her own message to the child who was aggressive.
- Assist each child in regaining self-control and engaging in an activity.

DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

Toddlers

- When a toddler is destructive, slowly approach and at her eye level, tell the child in a calm but firm voice to stop the activity and return the object to you or to its owner. If necessary offer to trade a different object with the child. Thank her when she cooperates. Assist the child in calming down by suggesting deep breathing or by rubbing her back.
- If another child's work or property was damaged, give attention to and show sympathy for the child whose work was harmed. Help all children involved mend or recreate the work, if possible.
- Redirect each child to a soothing activity.

Preschoolers

- When a preschooler is destructive, slowly approach and at her eye level, tell the child in a calm but firm voice to stop the activity and return the object to you or to its owner. If necessary give the child the option of letting go of the object herself or of your removing it. Thank her when she cooperates. Assist the child in calming down by suggesting deep breathing.
- If another child's work or property was damaged, give attention to and show sympathy for the child whose work was harmed.
- Help the child whose work was harmed use words to express her own message to the child who was aggressive.
- When possible, help all children involved mend or recreate what was harmed.
- Redirect each child to a soothing activity when each has regained control.

Don't show aggression toward the child or instruct other children to use physical aggression as protection. Don't tell the victim's family the name of the aggressive child.



DEVELOPMENTAL CHECK

Infants and Toddlers

- Infants may communicate by throwing objects or striking at people. This is typical behavior and is not aggression.
- Toddlers lack the verbal communication skills to let you know what they need or want and may resort to aggressive acts to communicate.
- Toddlers have very limited social skills and do not understand the concept of sharing resources and space. For example, when there is only one big red truck, and it is the most desirable toy, conflict that could escalate into aggression is likely.
- Toddlers need to be physically active and mentally engaged. If their physical activity is limited for too long, or if they become bored, aggression may result.

Preschoolers

- Preschoolers may have difficulty with a change in routine. Because they express their emotions strongly, the insecurity caused by a changed routine could escalate into aggression.
- Preschoolers are egocentric and see things from their own points of view. Problem solving is therefore limited by the individual ways in which they perceive a situation. This can cause frustration, leading to aggression.
- As preschoolers' independence increases, it may seem reasonable to them that they should be able to get or do what they want, when they want, and how they want. When you limit their choices, the lack of control they feel may cause their frustration to escalate into aggression.

PRESCRIPTION FOR PREVENTION

The best way to prevent children from becoming physically aggressive is to supervise them closely and plan the play space and activities to address their developmental needs.

Observe

- Recognize when children exhibit behaviors that indicate a need they cannot express verbally. Get involved before the behavior escalates into aggression.

Model

- Model cooperation, helpfulness, kindness, and respect by using appropriate ways of verbally expressing your frustration.

Enhance

- Provide multiple copies of popular toys and ensure adequate play space.
- Introduce activities that help children learn about friendly and gentle touching, such as shaking hands, patting, and hugging.
- Include adequate time in the daily schedule for physical activity, such as running, jumping, dancing, and climbing.