

Addressing children's challenging behavior

Teaching with respect

by Mary Gersten

Teachers encounter a variety of discipline issues in the classroom each day. We might wonder, "What are the reasons for these behaviors, and how should we respond?" We want children to be successful in preschool and in life; therefore, we must acquire and teach the skills children need to develop socially and emotionally. We must learn to teach with respect. Here are some suggestions — perhaps reminders — about how to facilitate children's development in these areas, while addressing their challenging behavior.

Have realistic expectations

Developmentally appropriate practice influences all of our work in early childhood education. However, it is often forgotten when it comes to guidance and discipline. How many times do we hear adults say, "You know better than that!" If children knew better, they would do better. The most effective means for managing a classroom is by having realistic expectations for a child



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based on his or her age and level of development. Our requests will, then, be connected to what they are capable of doing (not just what we want them to do). This will become the focus of any approach used.

Martha is having a conversation with another teacher regarding next week's lesson plans. The room is a mess, and it is approaching snack time. She realizes that the children cannot be expected to clean the room on their own just because she told them to do so. She knows that it is more realistic to end her conversation, and help them.

Encourage positive behavior

Many teachers use praise as a way of rewarding a child for appropriate ('good') behavior. Unfortunately, it can have the opposite effect. When used in excess, children grow immune to it, and praise becomes ineffective. Further, praise can be manipulative, as the child seeks out external rewards (compliments from others) rather than internal (feeling good about themselves because they did their best). Praise is also used to compare children: "I like how Johnny is sitting quietly." The child may respond by thinking, "Wow, I'm going to do that too so

he'll be proud of me," or simply, "Who cares?" By offering encouragement rather than praise, children learn that they are capable of making good choices on their own. This helps children feel good about themselves and they are, therefore, likely to make that same choice again.

Mr. Thompson is directing the children to the tables for math centers. All of the children are seated except for Ethan, who is still wandering around the room. Mr. Thompson announces, "When you're at the table and ready, I will pass out the assignments." When Gage signals for Ethan to sit by him, Mr. Thompson says "Thanks for making a place for Ethan at the table. You showed him you are a good friend."

Sir Ken Robinson (2009) notes that creativity in people decreases with age (from 90% as preschoolers to 10% as young adults). He attributes this to a lack of encouragement, or from actual discouragement. Children either use what talents they have been given, or they will lose them.

Scott is observing the artwork of his students. He stops at Gracie's desk. "I see you're working hard on this. Tell me more about it." He is using encouragement rather than praise, allowing Gracie to take pride in her own work.

Understand that behavior communicates needs

All behavior has a reason, even if sometimes the reason is not a good one. Behaviors are strategies we use to draw attention to our needs. Children act out if they feel their needs (e.g. for affection, comfort, or security) aren't being met. They are not mature enough to tell us in words which needs these are. The worst thing an adult can do is to ignore a child's request for help (which is what the behavior is for), or to be afraid of an outburst. By dismissing the child, or giving into his demands without examining them, we are failing to acknowledge his feelings, and are not offering genuine support in helping him communicate his needs in a way that will get them met. Children look to adults for guidance in how to behave; we allow them to have their feelings in a safe environment, and prevent them from hurting themselves or others.

Three-year-old Johnny has been whining all morning and refusing to participate in group activities. "I don't want to," he replies to his teacher's requests. When speaking to Johnny's mother, his teacher learns that Johnny hasn't been sleeping well. She understands now that he is not being argumentative; he has been trying to communicate his need for understanding and support. Perhaps allowing him some quiet time by himself will also help.

Avoid blaming other people

It is common for people to want to blame others for their feelings. Adults do it all of the time. However, Dr. Becky Bailey (1997), author of *There's Got To Be a Better Way*, believes that when we do this, we are giving up control of our emotions. We allow someone to *make* us mad or sad, while at the same time, look to others to *make* us happy. Teachers say, "I am sad that you . . ." for every action they disapprove of. Is it their intention to make children feel guilty? Is the teacher always

sad — or frustrated, angry, annoyed — by the children? How do we help children take responsibility for their feelings and their actions when we communicate this message to them?

Mrs. Castillo is upset to find a favorite class puppet with a rip in its arm. This is one that she keeps in a special place and does not usually allow the children to use without supervision. Instead of telling them, "I'm so unbelievably sad I could cry!" she can be honest and say, "I'm disappointed that this happened. What can we do to make sure it doesn't happen again?" She should also consider any responsibility she may have had in the incident: Did she leave the puppet out, creating a temptation? Did the children have enough other materials to use, so that they were not bored?

As adults, it is our responsibility to control our emotions and actions to set the example for children.

Be proactive

Guidance is generally more proactive, while discipline is more reactive. However, adults seldom plan in advance how they will address children's behavior. Discipline is meted out in the heat of the moment; it is often irrational or poorly executed. Alternatively, if teachers use a guidance approach, trusting relationships can be built in a positive atmosphere. Children come to appreciate that they can turn to an adult in times of trouble, and that problems can be solved. What Bailey calls conscious discipline includes being aware of what we are doing (and why) when it comes to managing the classroom.

The children have been told there will be watercolor painting and they are anxious to get started. Mr. Randy knows that if he is not prepared, the children are likely to get impatient. He remains calm to avoid adding to the commotion. He invites the children to assist in getting the supplies ready to give them something to do in-

stead of waiting for him, and to actively engage them in the activity set-up.

Model desired behavior

Adults should model the behaviors they want in children. We must give children time to practice new skills in the same way we would any other skill, such as math or spelling. Teachers often berate children for forgetting a classroom rule; however, if the teacher makes a mistake (such as choosing the wrong words in a tense situation), she is allowed a second chance. Learning from our mistakes, and having others see us correcting them, demonstrates how good choices are made.

Miss Suyapa is working with a group of three year olds who have become rather boisterous. She is wondering how she can get them to quiet down. Rather than yelling for them to settle down, she sits down quietly on the floor, and starts a whisper game. This gets their attention. Soon they all quiet down so they can hear and respond to what she's saying.

Give children respect

It is important to give children the respect they deserve. Adults who are in control of their emotions are less likely to react hastily (making quick judgments without having all of the facts). They remain calm, evaluate the situation, and proceed with caution. They also remember to use words that demonstrate their respect, such as please, thank you, and I'm sorry. We should reframe the way we talk to children, and tell them what to do rather than of what not to do. Using the word 'instead' to rephrase helps. In modeling, we focus our words and actions on the positive. The focus should be on what we want (expect) to happen.

Miss Gina is careful in wording her requests to the children. She says "Please" and "Thank you." She also says "Excuse me" and "I'm sorry" when she

makes an inaccurate or unfair judgment. These are terms she wants the children to hear often, and to learn to use with others.

Amara was in the store with her mom. She had been given a balloon to hold. Her mom said to Amara, “Now, don’t let it go.” Amara immediately let go of the string and watched the balloon float to the ceiling. In her frustration, her mother yelled, “I said DON’T.” The next time Amara was given a balloon, she said, “Now hold the balloon tight.” Amara held the balloon, safely making it to the car with it still in her hand.

Be consistent

Consistent expectations and predictable follow-through helps children feel secure in their environment. When expectations are communicated consistently, children know what to expect from the routine and the adults. When occasional surprises occur, the children will be less likely to be upset by them because they have a trusted teacher to guide them. When children exhibit unacceptable behavior, consistent consequences should follow.

Joseph is a boy in Miss Angie’s class who has been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. She is aware that consistency is important to Joseph; he needs to know when it is time to complete his tasks, and that he will be permitted to work on the computer after his work is done. She gives him cues as to when it is his turn, when his turn will be finished, and what he should do when his turn is over. If Miss Angie strays from this routine, even once, she knows that Joseph will become upset and will likely use unsafe behaviors to vent his frustration.

Taking a time-out

Adults have the same needs as children. When their needs are met, and feelings are acknowledged, they are better able to deal with classroom situations. When

teachers become overwhelmed, it is important for them to take a ‘time-out.’ They must remain calm in order to refrain from reacting harshly. Any words that an adult speaks to a child (whether out of anger or frustration) can have a lasting impact.

Mrs. Annaliese thought she had prepared well for the day. However, nothing seems to be going right. The children are quarreling and the program director is making demands on her time. Andrew and Maya have both spilled their milk. Rather than taking her frustration out on the children by yelling, Miss Annaliese asks for her director’s help and excuses herself to take a walk around the building to calm down.

Breaking old habits

Doing what is right isn’t always easy; it often means breaking old habits and starting fresh. This is how we put effort into the relationships we are building with children. We need time to develop a new set of behaviors.

There was a time when Miss Charlotte would command her students to complete a task, with little regard for their feelings about the task. She offered few choices (or choices that really were not choices). She was the teacher, and they were to mind her. With assistance from her coach/mentor, she came to realize that there were better ways to get results. Now she understands the role of respect in dealing with others. This means giving up some of her less effective practices, and retraining herself to treat her students the way she wants to be treated. Children learn respect by being respected.

Plan ahead

Adults become frustrated when things go awry. If it is because of poor planning on the part of the adults, it is unfair to blame the children for not responding

properly. If it is largely because of poor choices the children are making, we must first look at the other factors influencing their behaviors before placing blame. Again, when children know better, they do better. Blaming children for their misbehavior does not promote a positive, trusting learning environment, and it is ineffective for problem solving.

Miss Shaw has a busy day ahead of her. She hopes that it goes smoothly. Her best chance of this happening is to plan ahead. The first thing she will do is reinforce the consistent routine and classroom practices the children have come to expect. Secondly, she will inform, then guide the children through any changes and bumps in the road. She understands that children cannot be blamed when circumstances are beyond their control. At that age, very little is within their control — even their own behaviors. When they are left struggling for structure and support, they act out to let the adults around them know how they are feeling.

Teach problem solving

Teachers and students are meant to be partners in problem solving. It is not about the adults jumping in to ‘fix’ things for children; instead, it is about all sides coming together to arrive at a solution that works best for everyone. Sometimes adults jump to conclusions without understanding the situation. Start by asking the child, “How may I help you?” This allows the child to tell the teacher what the problem is, and it creates an opening to explore solutions without guessing or making false assumptions.

The steps to conflict resolution are:

1. Remaining calm when approaching the problem.
2. Stopping all hurtful actions and words.
3. Acknowledging the children’s feelings.
4. Gathering as much information about the incident as possible.
5. Restating the problem.

6. Asking for ideas for solutions.
7. Choosing one of the solutions presented by the children, if possible.
8. Being prepared to follow up with additional support.

These steps really work, regardless of who the parties involved are. When the problem is between an adult and a child, it is important for the teacher to play the same supportive role as they would if they were not directly involved in the incident.

Once all of the anxiety and hurtful feelings have subsided, end on a positive note. The child(ren) must leave the situation knowing that everything is okay, and that no real damage has been done. If the teacher was directly involved, it is important to show the child that she does not hold a grudge. Encourage children to do the same; a good number of battles take place between children who are particularly close to one another.

Abby and Lin are arguing over a doll buggy. Mrs. Sookoo calmly walks over to where the girls are. She gently places her hand on the buggy (to neutralize the item). She then places one hand on each of the girls' arms to signal calm and support. She tells them that she understands they both want the buggy and wants to hear what both of them have to say. She displays as much understanding as possible saying, "How can we find a way to share this one buggy?" Abby, it turns out, had the buggy first, and Lin feared she wasn't going to let her have a turn. Abby says that Lin can have it when she's done. Mrs. Sookoo says, "If we let Abby finish her turn, how can we let Lin know when it's her turn?" Abby says, "I'll just finish my shopping, then she can have it." Lin agrees to this, and everyone seems pleased with the solution. Mrs. Sookoo remembers to keep an eye on the situation, and again acknowledges the girls' efforts when Abby does give the buggy to Lin. "Abby, I see that when you finished your shopping Lin was able to have her

turn with it. It looks like you really enjoy playing together."

Later in the week, Mrs. Sookoo finds these same girls discussing a toy. Mrs. Sookoo hears Abby say to Lin, "Remember how we can take turns?"

Conclusion

Children are more likely to learn the skills we want them to have if they are in a caring, trusting environment. In fact, without the opportunity to build confidence in themselves through positive relationships with others, they are destined to fail. Anger, resentment, or fears from past experiences (Hart & Hodson, 2004) have been shown to affect future successes. This explains the need to pay particular attention to children's social-emotional development. The benefits of teaching with respect makes the effort worthwhile. That, to me, is what teaching is all about.

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