

Challenging Behavior in Young Children:

A Guide for Teachers

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What is Challenging Behavior?

Challenging behavior in young children is an issue for many teachers.

Challenging behavior is any behavior that interferes with the child's optimal development, learning, or play (Dunlap et al., 2007). The behavior may inhibit prosocial behavior or harm the child and those around the child. Examples include aggressive behaviors like hitting, spitting, biting, destroying objects, or bullying (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007), disruptive behavior (Dunlap et al., 2003), defiance or noncompliance (Dunlap et al., 2003).

Glossary

1. Antecedent: an action, behavior, or stimulus that occurs before a behavior (Kerr & Nelson, 2010)
2. Challenging behavior: any consistent behavior that inhibits a child's development, prosocial behavior, or is harmful to the child (Dunlap et al., 2003)
3. Consequence: an action, behavior, or stimulus that occurs after a behavior (Kerr & Nelson, 2010)
4. Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA): a process used to identify the functions a maladaptive behavior serves, includes observations, interviews, and developmental tools (Kerr & Nelson, 2010)
5. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): a system that supports and promotes positive behavior in children in all settings: utilizes primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention (Kerr & Nelson, 2010)
6. Replacement behaviors: appropriate behaviors used to replace challenging behaviors (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007)
7. Teaching pyramid: a teaching model proven effective in reducing challenging behavior in young children; promotes positive relationships, classroom practices, social and emotional skills, and individual interventions (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003)
8. Universal prevention: a system used with all students as a preventative and protective strategy (Kerr & Nelson, 2010)

Case Study

Before:

Miranda is a four year-old girl who presents challenging behavior. At school, she is aggressive, disruptive, and constantly on the move. She hits, bites, and kicks her classmates and teachers. Miranda has severe tantrums, throwing her body on the floor, kicking and screaming. Her teachers are worried she may harm herself and put them in danger as well. During structured activities, Miranda leaves the area and yells to make herself the center of attention. She destroys toys along with other children's work. Her parents report similar behaviors at home. Miranda's teachers and parents do not know how to handle and correct her challenging behavior.

After:

Miranda's teachers conduct a Functional Behavior Analysis or FBA to better understand her behavior, to identify any relationships between her behavior and the environment, the functions it serves, and to possibly identify a trend in the antecedents and consequences of her behavior. Using interviews and observations to gather information about Miranda, the teachers include her parents in conducting the FBA.

The teachers also begin to make an effort to build a relationship with Miranda. They greet her every morning with warmth and enthusiasm. This makes Miranda excited to be at school. She enjoys the attention and positive relationships with her teachers. They are now acting preventively instead of reactively to her challenging behavior.

Replacement behaviors are taught to Miranda. When she becomes angry she stomps her feet to show her frustrations. Her teachers bring soft balls into the classroom for Miranda to throw at the wall instead of hitting or biting. A few universal preventions

are implemented in the classroom. The classroom is rearranged to better fit the needs of all students. Noisy activities are separate from quiet activities. Large spaces, that encourage running, are removed.

The teachers give time countdowns to the children when transitions are about to occur. Toys are on shelves on the children's level where they can be easily accessed and cleaned up. New toys are added to the room that fit the children's interests. A few children really enjoy trains, so a train table is now in the room. Soft plastic animals and dinosaurs are also available. Many of these actions aimed at reducing Miranda's challenging behavior benefit the entire classroom.

Miranda's teachers continue to work with her parents to make sure their efforts are working and do not need to be adjusted.

Discussion Questions

Q: Think of your own personal space, your desk, office, or rooms in your home. How do you have them arranged? Does the physical space and layout fit your needs? What are your student's needs? How can you rearrange your classroom to fit the needs of your students?

Q: Sometime students present challenging behavior because they lack the skills to verbalize or make their needs and wants known. What can you do for these students in your classroom to allow them to express their needs and wants?

Q: Parents are often as frustrated and baffled as you are with their children's challenging behavior. Parental involvement is key in reducing challenging behavior. How can you invite parents into your classroom? How can you make their presence welcome along with utilizing their skills and time?

FAQs

Q: What is the best place to start?

A: The best place to start is to implement universal classroom practices. Universal practices are prevention techniques implemented to benefit all students. Building a strong relationship with the child goes a long way and can also be a good starting point.

Q: How do I involve the child's family?

A: Family involvement is key to reducing challenging behaviors. Include the parents in the planning process and allow them to feel invested in the intervention process. Ask them about the child's behavior at home, life changes, or medical problems. As a teacher, you can be a helpful contact and source of information for the parents.

Q: I don't have time in my classroom to implement additional interventions?

A: Many effective strategies in reducing challenging behavior can benefit all children, simple changes to the classroom's physical space and routine can reduce some children's challenging behavior.

Q: What is the quickest and easiest way to reduce challenging behavior?

A: Every child is different. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix to reducing challenging behavior. Simply forming a good relationship has numerous benefits.

References

Dobbs, J., & Arnold, D. H. (2009). Relationship between preschool teachers' reports of children's behavior and their behavior toward those children. *School Psychology Quarterly, 24*(2), 95-105.

This article discusses teacher's likeliness to give children commands to children who are perceived as being difficult. Children who are thought to have challenging behaviors are treated differently by teachers. Commands are used more with children perceived as difficult than with children perceived as well-behaved. Teachers use commands as a preemptive approach to correct behavior they expect from children with challenging behavior.

This has important implications to teachers. It is important to react to the behavior the child is actually presenting instead of the behavior the teacher expects from the child. Teachers need to be conscious of their reactions and treatment of young children. Early teacher-student relationship impacts the child's future success in school.

Dunlap, G., Strain, P. S., Fox, L., Carta, J. J., Conroy, M., Smith, B. J.,... Sowell, C.

(2006). Prevention and intervention with young children's challenging behavior: Perspectives regarding current knowledge. *Behavioral Disorders, 32*(1), 29-45.

A gap exists between evidence-based practices and the actual practices used with children who have challenging behavior. This article identifies and discusses the research about the presence and impact, prevention, and interventions in the field. Young children with challenging behavior are typically not identified and do not receive appropriate services. When children are not identified nor receive services, challenging

behavior tend to become long lasting and negatively impact school success, peer interactions, and family interactions. When examining prevention, families who utilize physical and mental health services are less likely to have children with challenging behavior. Parents who are nurturing and use positive behavior strategies have healthy relationships with their children. This leads to fewer problem behaviors. Likewise, teachers who have good interactions with children and create a high quality child care environment are less likely to see challenging behavior in their classrooms. Five key features for intervention are identified in the article. Using a functional assessment, teaching children replacement skills, altering the children's social and physical environments, implementing interventions over time and multiple locations are essential in reducing challenging behaviors.

Lastly involving the family in planning and implementing the intervention makes the reduction of challenging behavior longer lasting in young children. Teachers can take note of these essential features in reducing challenging behavior and utilize them in the classroom. Having researched based skills and techniques to use with children makes teaching exceptional children easier. Teachers have a large impact on young children and using these effective techniques is key.

Fox, L., Dunlap, G., Hemmeter, M. L., Joseph, G. E., & Strain, P. S. (2003). The teaching pyramid: A model for supporting social competence and preventing challenging behavior in young children. *Young Children, July*.

The Teaching Pyramid, an effective model for teachers to support social competence in students and to prevent challenging behavior, is discussed in this article.

The model is set up in a pyramid fashion and has four levels. The first level is building positive relationships. This forms a foundation for interactions in the classroom between teachers and students. A positive relationship improves children's self-concept, confidence, and sense of security. This relationship can influence and improve children's behavior. The next step in the model is implementing classroom preventative practices. Preventative practices include teaching children about routine and expectations, creating a schedule and physical environment that fits the children, and providing materials that reflect the children's interests and encourage social interactions. Giving children attentions for using prosocial behavior is another important preventative practice. Using social and emotional teaching strategies is the third step in the model. Teachers can help children with friendship skills, anger and impulse control, interpersonal problem solving, and emotional literacy. These skills help children identify their feelings and deal with them in a healthy and productive manner. The last step in the model is planning intensive individualized interventions. The model focuses on positive behavior support to reduce challenging behaviors.

All children can benefit from the Teaching Pyramid. It encourages positive development and helps reduce challenging behavior. Teachers can implement the lower steps of the model in their classroom and move to higher steps if challenging behavior is still occurring in a child.

Kaiser, B., & Rasminsky, J. S. (2007). *Challenging behavior in young children : Understanding, preventing, and responding effectively* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Allyn and Bacon.

This book is a helpful resource for teachers of young children with challenging behavior. It gives an overview of challenging behavior; including definitions, age appropriate behavior, causes and risk factors, and protective factors. This overview can help teachers better understand the challenging behavior children exhibit and how their actions can impact the children's behavior. The book also discusses practices teachers can use in their classrooms. Modifications to the physical space and program of the classroom can reduce challenging behavior. Teaching social skills and creating a nurturing social environment are helpful. Positive behavior support along with guidance and appropriate punishment are also discussed.

Worcester, J. A., Nesman, T. M., Mendez, L. M. R., & Keller, H. R. (2008). Giving voice to parents of young children with challenging behavior. *Exceptional Children*, 74(4), 509-525.

This article highlights five main challenges experienced by parents of young children with challenging behavior. First, parents have difficulties in receiving helpful and accurate information about their children. This includes information about identifying a problem and a diagnosis. Second, parents struggle in obtaining support and services for their children's challenging behavior. Third, financial stress is experienced by parents. Parents struggle with the basic cost of children needs, including medical bills and co-pays for appointments and interventions. Holding a job is also challenging; children have appointments and therapies to attend during the work day. Fourth, family stress between immediate and extended family is experienced. Lastly, parents feel

isolated from the community. A stigma is associated with challenging behavior and parents worry about the reaction of others.

Teachers being aware of these issues could be beneficial to parents. Teachers could be an additional source of information and a contact for parents with young children with challenging behaviors. This would not only be beneficial to the parents but it could also improve the parent-teacher bond. When parents are involved with their children's school and have a strong parent-teacher bond the child tends to behave and perform better.