Child Development Behavior Intervention Process

Resource Guide for Intervention:
Common Challenging Behaviors in Early Childhood

Developed By: Susan Carter
August 2006
Common Challenging Behaviors in Early Childhood

Young children may exhibit challenging behavior in the school setting for a variety of reasons. These behaviors can be difficult to manage and may disrupt the classroom setting if not addressed early. Many of these behaviors are present in most children at earlier developmental stages. However, most children have ‘grown out’ of these prior to enrollment in school. For children that are at risk, it may be more common in the child development classrooms to see these behaviors displayed.

The five most common behaviors displayed at this age are temper tantrums, aggression, bullying, biting and testing limits. (Creative Curriculum for Preschool, 2002) Below you will find each of these behaviors explained with common causes as well as intervention techniques used to decrease the frequency of each behavior.

**Biting** – Children may bite themselves, other classmates or adults in the school environment. Biting occurs for several reasons: As a way of communicating, in a cluster with other aggressive behaviors or when the student is overstimulated. It’s important to watch and collect data to try and determine which cause may be the primary reason a particular student bites.

If a student bites as a means of communication, we must teach the child to express anger, fear, frustration, jealousy etc. in another way. For example, Johnny may bite whenever another student tries to take a toy, get to the swing first, bump him in line to get lunch, etc. Johnny may be biting as a means of communicating displeasure in what is happening. We need to teach Johnny to tell an adult when a situation like one of these occurs. Watch Johnny carefully and when you observe a student trying to take a toy – intervene then to prevent the bite and tell Johnny – “Johnny, are you mad that Sally tried to take your truck? It’s okay to be upset, but tell Sally that you are playing with it now but you will share it with her later.” Prompt Johnny to tell Sally this – you may have to say it with him. “Sally, I’m playing with the truck now – you can later.” If Sally were to continue to take the truck, prompt Johnny to say “No, Sally” and tell the teacher.

If Johnny only bites as an aggressive behavior, follow the guidelines below for addressing physical aggression.

Many young children bite if overstimulated. They have generally grown out of this by school age, but some can continue during their early school years. Watch to see if Johnny only bites when the room is noisy, when he is excited about something or during an unusual change in schedule. If this is the case, staff needs to monitor the environment and when these stimulating situations occur and be close to Johnny to prevent biting. Move him to a calmer area and reinforce the no biting rule. Some children who bite due to overstimulation can be given another object to bite (teething ring, wet cloth) to bite until they can control this urge.

Regardless of the reason, if a student actually bites, he must be stopped immediately. Go to the student and say, “Johnny, no biting.” Take him to a quiet area – such as a time out
chair and have him sit for 4-5 minutes (1 minute per year of age). Go to the victim and comfort them. Allow Johnny to see the victim getting the attention. After Johnny’s quiet time, and when he is calm, talk with Johnny about the incident and reinforce the correct ways from above to handle future situations. It is important that Johnny go to the victim and apologize even though he may need staff support to do so.

**Please note – not only would biting Johnny be the WRONG thing to do in a school setting and is absolutely not allowed, there is no evidence that supports this as an effective method of curbing the impulse to bite. This only shows Johnny that biting is ‘okay’ sometimes – like when the adult bites the child. This age child is too young to understand the concept of “this is how it feels to bite someone.”

**Temper Tantrums** – All of us have witnessed children having temper tantrums. Most tantrumming behavior has stopped by the time a child is school age. However, some children mature slower emotionally than others and this may still be a developmental stage for some child development students. There are basically 4 types of tantrums and each type is discussed below with suggested interventions.

1. *Tantrums caused primarily by frustration or fatigue.* Like frustration biting above due to an inability to communicate well, the same techniques can be applied to tantrums due to frustration. It is important when the student is frustrated to be supportive and to listen. Validate the student’s feelings and teach a more appropriate way to express the frustration. Tantrums are more likely to occur when a student is hungry, fatigued or sick. Pay close attention to these conditions for children and allow rest, change in activity, a snack, etc.

2. *Tantrums that are to seek attention or to be demanding.* Ignore these tantrums as much as possible. Tantrums for attention may include whining, crying, pounding or hitting the floor or door, slamming a door, or breath-holding. As long as the child stays in one place and is not too disruptive, you can leave him alone. If you recognize that a certain event is going to push a student over the edge, try to shift his attention to something else prior to the tantrum to prevent its occurrence. However, don't give in to the child's demands once it has begun. During the temper tantrum, if his behavior is harmless, ignore it completely. Once a tantrum has started, it rarely can be stopped. Move away so the student no longer has an audience. Don't try to reason with the child. Simply state, "I can see you're very angry. I'll leave you alone until you cool off. Let me know if you want to talk." Let the student regain control. After the tantrum, be friendly and try to return things to normal.

3. *Some children have tantrums when they are refusing or trying to avoid a task or activity.* You may have to insist that these children actually engage in the undesired task. But… be careful to not engage in a power struggle – don’t assign a task or activity if you can’t ensure that you can follow through and ‘make’ the student participate. Give students forced choices, for example, “You can color the first page or the second page first, but you have to do both.” Ask yourself if the activity is actually that important. If the child refuses something unimportant (such as a snack or sleeping during nap time), let
it go before a tantrum begins. Devise an alternative activity, such as quietly looking at books on his mat during nap time. Some of these tantrums can be prevented by giving the student a 5-minute warning instead of asking him suddenly to stop what he is doing and start an undesired activity.

4. Some tantrums are too disruptive to leave the child in the place where the tantrum began. Examples of these type of tantrums may be any aggressive behavior (hitting), screaming/yelling too loud for other students to continue the activity, having a tantrum in an unsafe place (in the middle of the hall while other students are going to lunch) or throwing or damaging property during a tantrum. On such occasions, guide or move the student to a quiet area such as a time out chair or another unused area of the school close to where the tantrum began. If a student will stay in a time out chair and calm down have the student stay for just a few minutes. The general rule of thumb is 1 minute per year of age. After the time out period, talk with the student and role play different ways to handle future situations that might occur.

Bullying – Young children bully others to exert control over their environment or other children. Children who bully other children may be unable to initiate friendly interactions, express their feelings, or ask for what they need. The key to promoting positive interactions among young children is teaching them to assert themselves effectively. Children who express their feelings and needs while respecting those of others will be neither victims nor aggressors. Adults must show children that they have the right to make choices -- in which toys they play with, or (within boundaries) what they wear and what they eat. Below are some keys to teaching young children to be assertive.

- Demonstrate assertive behavior (e.g., saying "No" to another child's unacceptable demands) and contrast aggressive or submissive responses through demonstrations. Let children role-play with puppets or dolls.

- Intervene when interactions seem headed for trouble and suggest ways for children to compromise, or to express their feelings in a productive way.

- Teach children to seek help when confronted by the abuse of power (physical abuse, sexual abuse, or other) by other children or adults.

- Remind children to ignore routine teasing by turning their heads or walking away. Not all provocative behavior must be acknowledged.

- Teach children to ask for things directly and respond directly to each other. Friendly suggestions are taken more readily than bossy demands. Teach children to ask nicely, and to respond appropriately to polite requests.

- After a conflict between children, ask those involved to replay the scene. Show children how to resolve problems firmly and fairly.
• Show children how to tell bullies to stop hurtful acts and to stand up for themselves when they are being treated unfairly.

• Encourage children not to give up objects or territory to bullies (e.g., say, "I'm using this toy now"). Preventing bullies from getting what they want will discourage aggressive behavior.

• Identify acts of aggression, bossiness, or discrimination for children and teach them not to accept them (e.g., say, "Girls are allowed to play that, too").

(Taken from National Association for the Education of Young Children – Promoting Excellence in Early Childhood Education, 2005)

Physical Aggression – Aggression must be immediately stopped by staff in the classroom. It is important that all our students feel safe at school. Sometimes children do not have the social skills or self-control to manage their behavior. These must be taught. When children can't find the words to deal with aggressive feelings or are not encouraged to express themselves, they become frustrated. At other times, children cannot cope with growing levels of anger in themselves or in others. In both cases, children need to learn acceptable ways to assert themselves and to learn coping skills. For young children to outgrow their aggressive ways, they need positive, consistent, nurturing discipline. They need to learn positive problem-solving techniques. Teachers need to teach social skills with direct instruction.

• First, children need to know we care. Express interest in them and genuinely remark about how glad you are to see them each day. Model kindness and caring. Your bond with each child is the biggest deterrent to aggressive acts. Use your words, touch, eyes and body language to display nurturing and demonstrate positive interactions with all the students and the staff.

• Teach classroom rules during small groups such as during circle time. Include the specific rules about “No hurt” or “No hitting” or another way to define that aggression will not be tolerated.

• Use a specific curriculum, such as Second Step, to teach appropriate social skills. Anger management materials are also readily available to use with this age group. The guidance counselor in your building can help with this aspect.

• Practice real life conflict management as situations arise. If staff observes a conflict beginning between two children, intervene early to help them negotiate and solve it with words. You may have to be very specific about what they should say to each other. Remember to praise the students, for example, “I could tell you were angry but I really like the way you and Sally decided to share the blocks.”

• Tell children exactly what you want them to do, not what you don’t want them to do. For example, tell Johnny to tell a teacher if someone is bothering him. Don’t say, “Johnny you know you shouldn’t hit.” Students need an alternative behavior before they will stop a behavior that has been working for them.
• If Johnny does hit Sally, remove Johnny from the immediate area to a quiet area such as has been described above. Lavish Sally with positive reinforcement and ensure that she is okay. After Johnny is calm, have him apologize to Sally and help Johnny role play different ways he could have handled the situation.
• Be sure to recognize small successes. Notice and praise each student for handling a conflict. For example, if Johnny is playing with a few other children at the sand table and Sally comes up and pushes her way into the group and you hear Johnny tell her, “Stop pushing me”, praise him lavishly for using his words. Show Sally how to enter a group of children using appropriate social skills, ie. “Can I play with you?”
• Teach children to ‘count to 10’. Even young children can understand this method of learning self control. Alternatively, teach them to take 3 deep breaths if they feel themselves becoming angry. This may be part of an anger management program as discussed above or just simple classroom strategies you want to share with all the children.
• Avoid telling students to punch a pillow or throw different objects. This can teach young children that aggression is okay in certain instances and they may be too young to understand the differences between situations, people, environments and objects.
• You can however, have children express anger and frustration through drawing, role play, with puppets, storytelling, etc. Additionally, if a child is showing early signs of frustration, you may direct them to a hands on activity – modeling clay, helping you with a physical task, bouncing a ball, sand/water play – to allow them to ‘work out’ their frustration with a calming activity.

Testing Limits – This is probably the most common behavioral concern during early childhood development. Although children actually need and want limits, testing them is their way of ensuring that their environment is safe and developing independence in thought and action. Therefore it is reasonable to expect children to occasionally try to test adults’ commitment by breaking the rule. Children test limits to assert their own independence and to see if the adults are willing to stand behind what they say is important.

Too few or too many limits create fear, anxiety, or anger. Limits that are clear, positive, and consistently enforced are an important step toward responsive discipline. Limits are values translated into guidelines for children's behavior. Children need to know what are the behavioral values and expectations in the school environment.

There are 4 types of limits that we set for our children:

• To prevent physical harm, as in, “We only use our hands nicely when touching.”
• To protect property, as in, "Play with the ball outside, not in the classroom."
• To prevent psychological harm, as in, "When your friend makes a mistake, give her some help. Laughing at her would make her very sad."
• To show respect for others, as in, "Ask Jamie before you play with his toys."
Keys to Effective Limits

- Keep your limits to important matters. Too many limits can be a burden and confusing for children and hard to remember.
- Set reasonable limits. Can the child do what is expected of him or her? Consider his or her age and developmental stage.
- Teach self-discipline with clear, positive limits.
- Be consistent with limits you set. If limits are not consistently enforced, the child will be confused.
- Involve children in setting some of their limits. Asking children to give their opinions about limits boosts self-confidence and self-control.
- Help children understand the reasons for limits. Children are more likely to cooperate if they understand the reason for the limits.
- Set enforceable limits. Teachers must enforce limits that the student deliberately defies. Can you enforce a rule that a student always wear a hat and coat to they go outside to recess when it is cold? Yes, because you can control whether they go outside. Can you enforce a rule that they have to do their homework? No, but you can give consequence if they don’t. When setting limits, think about whether you can enforce them. For example, can you enforce a rule that a student always eats their school lunch?

A classroom management plan needs to be designed ahead of time. As children should be involved with setting the rules, so they should be involved in setting rewards for compliance and consequences for noncompliance. Remember that it is much more effective to reward children with positives than to have consequences. So, ‘catch them being good’! This will generally eliminate most challenges and help build that trust and bond that is so important between teachers and children. If consequences are necessary, they should be short in length and directly related to the limit challenged. For example, it is reasonable to have a young child apologize for a disrespectful remark to a classmate or take a short time to calm down in a quiet area for a show of minor aggression and then apologize. Another example may be to have a child sit in a chair during circle behind his other classmates if he is unable to sit in the circle without being disruptive by continuously talking or touching others. Conversely, it would not be meaningful to take recess away for spitting milk during lunch. Have the student clean the area instead. When designing rewards and consequences, we need to think about what the students find most reinforcing and what specifically might teach them different behavior for use in future situations.

While these behaviors are challenging for the teacher, they are really not outside the developmental realm of young children, especially children who have been identified as students at risk. This is an exciting age for children as they are stretching their wings and learning to interact with others and their environment in a more mature manner. Teachers can make a big impact on each child’s future ability to work, play and live in the world with positive interactions with everyone they encounter.
Additional Resources

Internet:

http://www.gentleteaching.com/
Gentle Teaching – A Favorite!

http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/tools.html
Center for Evidence Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior

http://csefel.uiuc.edu/
Center of the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning

http://www.headstartinfo.org/infocenter/inetwork.htm
Child Development – An Internet Pathfinder

Aggression in the Kindergarten Classroom

University of West Florida – Collection of Links on Classroom Management

Mrs. Nelson’s Class – A great web site including pictures and specific suggestions for setting up a classroom management system in an early learning setting

http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/products/perspectives/sep-oct98/klein.html
ABC, 123...Success in the Classroom, Strategies for Behavior Management with Preschool and Kindergarten Students with Hearing Loss (Great ideas for all children)

http://www.fvsd.ab.ca/stm/classroom_management_tips_and_be.htm
Classroom management tips and beginning of the year ideas (one of my favorite grassroots sites)

A to Z Teacher Stuff – Managing Behavior

Education World – Classroom Management Tips

http://www.schoolbehavior.com/
School Behavior – Awareness, Empathy and Skills
Print:

The Tough Kid Book: Practical Classroom Management Strategies
by Ginger, Ph.D. Rhode, William R. Jenson, H. Kenton Reavis

The Tough Kid Tool Box
by William R. Jenson, Ginger, Ph.D. Rhode, Ginger Rhode, H. Kenton Reavis

The Tough Kid Social Skills Book
by Susan M. Sheridan, Tom Oling

Behavioral intervention manual: Intervention strategies for behavior problems in the educational environment
by Stephen B McCarney

The teacher's encyclopedia of behavior management: 100 problems/500 plans reproducible tools
by Randall S Sprick

1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12
by Thomas W. Phelan

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk
by Adele Faber, Elaine Mazlish

Beyond Gentle Teaching: A Non-aversive Approach to Helping Those in Need
John J. McGee

Mending Broken Hearts
By John J. McGee

So This is Normal Too?
by Deborah Hewitt

Skillstreaming in Early Childhood
by Ellen McGinnis & Arnold P. Goldstein

Ready-to-Use Social Skills Lessons & Activities for Grades PreK-K
edited by Ruth Weltmann Begun

ADHD in the Young Child
by Cathy Reimers, Ph.D. & Bruce A. Brunger