

Including Children with Challenging Behaviors



All children can present challenging behaviors some of the time. Whether mildly annoying or harmful to others, children's actions reflect their feelings. Helping children learn to express their feelings in appropriate ways requires patience, consistency, and collaboration with others.

First

Children with challenging behaviors are different from one another. The techniques that are successful with one child may not work with another. In order for intervention to be effective, teachers must get to know the child and family and become a careful observer of the child in the classroom.

- Work together with the family to make sure the home and school environments are as positive and consistent as possible.
- Observe the child over time and in different settings in order to find out as much as you can about the child's actions.
- What exactly is the challenging behavior you want to address?
- Is the child hostile and aggressive?
- Does the child seem impulsive and unable to control his or her movements?
- Is the child disruptive or destructive?
- Does the child follow directions given by adults?
- Does the child seem anxious or angry?
- Develop methods of frequent and systematic communication with the family and others involved in providing services to the child in order to share experiences and effective intervention techniques.
- Try to understand any feelings the child may have that may be at the root of the behaviors.

Arranging Space & Materials

1. Consider each child's needs when arranging the environment. For some children, it is helpful to screen out excessive noises or other distractions. For others, it is important to provide a continuous array of stimulating activities to keep them engaged.
2. Set up well-defined and attractive activity areas with pictures showing children using materials appropriately.
3. Provide adequate space that can be used throughout the day for active movement, especially on days when bad weather prevents outdoor play.
4. Provide plenty of duplicate toys to reduce problems with sharing and taking turns.
5. Provide a space for each child to keep personal belongings.
6. Provide a quiet place where the child can concentrate on activities free from distraction.
7. Provide a quiet place away from others where the child can go to calm down.
8. Label storage shelves and bins clearly and help the children understand the organization of classroom materials and toys. Assist them in cleaning up one activity before beginning the next.
9. Use visual aids such as carpet squares or tape to show the child a definite place to be during group floor activities or hallway transitions.

10. In new situations, stay near a child or try a gentle physical touch to help the child stay in control of his or her behavior. With some children, holding hands has a calming effect.
11. Provide a predictable environment. Stick to routines that work.

Teaching Strategies

1. Ensure teacher expectations are appropriate for the child's age and development. Avoid overemphasizing academics during the preschool years and concentrate on promoting healthy social and emotional development and language. Ensure ample opportunity for the child to feel successful and competent.
2. Show the child he or she is a worthwhile person capable of developing self-control. You can demonstrate your confidence by creating systems for turn-taking or participation in activity centers. Such systems provide the child a chance to regulate his or her own behavior. Use such tools as a timer, a waiting list, or clothes-pin nametags indicating what center the child is engaged in.
3. Keep rules simple and few and explain them clearly to the child (and family).
4. Provide clear, one-step directions. Begin the directions with the child's name in order to get the child's attention. When the child is looking at you, give the direction. Then allow adequate time for the child to comply and watch for signs that the child is getting ready to follow the direction.
5. Develop procedures ahead of time for planned transitions between activities. Consider placing staff strategically in critical areas to assist an impulsive child.
6. Provide numerous opportunities throughout the day for all children to make choices about what they want to do. Do not phrase questions to seem like choices the children really don't have. For example, do not ask, "Would you like to put away the trikes and come in?" if there is no choice about coming inside.
7. Walk through the routines of the day with the child. Show the child how to use the listening station — for example, how to put on the headphones and operate the tape player. Sometimes children are disruptive because they do not understand classroom routines and expectations.
8. Observe a child with a short attention span in various activities over many days. Find out how long the child's typical attention span is and plan activities for that length of time for that child. Be prepared to help the child choose the next activity before he or she leaves the first activity and starts to wander.
9. Maintain an awareness of the activities the overly active child sticks with the longest. Start with these activities in order to try to extend the child's attention span.
10. Increase a child's attention span by calling attention to unexplored aspects of an object or activity. Ask questions to continue the child's engagement with the activity before the child loses interest.
11. Offer to help the impulsive child plan his or her next move. Watch for signs that the child is ready to quit an activity and then offer choices of what to do next.

Interacting

1. Give attention to the child when the child is behaving appropriately. Build the child's self-esteem through meaningful rewards and thoughtful comments that link the child's performance with his or her own efforts or abilities. Be aware that providing reinforcers such as stickers or candy may cause some children to depend on external reinforcement and to fail to recognize their own responsibility for their actions.
2. Avoid punishment that is derogatory or demeaning. Use punishments that are logical and natural consequences.
3. Speak at the child's eye level and look into his or her face.
4. Encourage the child to talk about his or her feelings, and to express them in various constructive ways. Consider rehearsing alternate acceptable responses to feelings at a time when the child is not being disruptive or aggressive.
5. Get to know the child's unique signals of frustration, overstimulation, or anger. If possible, help the child identify his or her own behaviors building up to a lack of control. Work with the child to develop a special signal showing that you are aware he or she needs assistance or a change in activity.
6. Redirect or provide simple, new directions to the child that name the desired behavior and help the child refocus. For example, say to a child who is painting on the wall, "Here is some paper to paint on if you would like to paint." Use a calm, but firm voice.
7. Provide ample warning when an activity is about to end.
8. Meet with staff to discuss specific procedures to manage some children's behavior. Such a program is developed and documented after observing the child over time and noting the circumstances leading to and following the challenging behavior. Keep records and review the procedure frequently to ensure consistency across staff, revising as needed.
9. Use a time-out procedure in which the child is removed temporarily from the group as a last resort. Make any decision to use a time-out procedure jointly with the family, other teachers, and the program administrator. Write down the time-out procedure and document every incident. Explain the time-out procedure to the child before using it.
10. Communicate regularly with family members and other adults working with the child to establish consistency and to share ideas. ■

References

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