



Why Children Show Problematic Behaviors

All too often adults jump to correct a child's misbehavior without thinking about the reason for it. Why might the child be behaving a certain way? How can our understanding of what's causing the behavior help us to change it? In order to fully understand the causes of certain behaviors, we may need to talk with family members and other caregivers. We may need to observe the child in a variety of routines and activities. Taking time to gather a little information will give us a better understanding of the child's needs. Here are four possible reasons for children's inappropriate behaviors:

Environment

Often problem behaviors in children are the result of a poorly planned and organized program.

- Make sure group size and staff:child ratios are appropriate for the children's ages.
- Set aside adult planning time every week to discuss the classroom environment, curriculum, and children's interests, activities, and needs.
- Involve families in the program and communicate with them regularly in order to understand the changing experiences and needs of the children.

Lack of Experience

The child may not know that the behavior is not acceptable.

- Make sure any directions are clear and that children understand them.
- Take time to explain to the child why the behavior is not acceptable and what the preferred behavior is. The best time to do this is when the child is calm.
- Be careful not to expect too much at once.
- Make sure you are not reinforcing the behavior by laughing at how cute it is or talking about it in front of the child.
- Model appropriate behavior yourself.

Frustration

The child may be frustrated because adult expectations are too high or because he or she lacks the skills needed to do a task or to communicate clearly.

- Think about the age of the child and make sure your expectations meet his or her developmental abilities. Remember that group care can be stressful for young children. Be sure to provide time and a place for them to be by themselves when they need to be.
- Think about the way a child communicates. Is the child understood by others? Is there anything you can do to help the child express himself or herself more clearly? What feelings underlie the behavior?
- Change your expectations and adapt the way you interact with the child if it is necessary to meet the child's developmental needs.
- Make sure you offer ample opportunities for the children to choose their own materials and activities.

- Let the child know you understand he or she feels frustrated while you describe and model more desirable behaviors.
- Be prepared for angry outbursts from the child when you first try to help a child learn new skills.

Attention

Children who do not receive enough positive attention may attract negative attention rather than be ignored.

- Pay attention to the child when his or her behavior is positive. Talk with the other adults who take care of this child about ways that tone and interactions can be used to promote the child's self-esteem.
- Make changes in the environment or activities when feasible to prevent negative behavior.
- Be aware that you may want to avoid or ignore the child when there are no problematic behaviors because the child generally demands so much of your time, but don't. Use this time to enjoy the child and get to know his or her positive characteristics.

Power

Some children may simply refuse to do what is expected or asked of them.

- Build in lots of opportunities for the child to make choices about materials and activities throughout the day. Think about offering clear choices about what he or she might enjoy doing first, beginning when the child first arrives in the classroom.
- Talk with other caregivers about the child's behavior and develop a plan to deal with the child's noncompliance. Use logical consequences whenever possible. For example, if the child refuses to clean up after an activity, stay inside with the child until he or she finishes the task while the others go outside.
- Communicate regularly with the other caregivers so that all of you are consistent in the way you handle the child's problematic behavior.
- Avoid getting into an argument or power struggle with the child. Stay calm and follow through on logical consequences.
- Don't forget to pay attention to the child when he or she is behaving appropriately. ■

Reference

Kontos, S., Dunham, J.H., Litchfield, M., Murphy, D., & Tiffany, K. (1987). *Neighborcare training manual for family day care*. Project Neighborcare (Handicapped Children's Early Education Program. Grant #60084001342.)