

Practical Strategies for Minimizing Challenging Behaviors in the Preschool Classroom

Challenging behaviors can happen to children with a variety of abilities in all kinds of settings, and children's early experiences as members of classroom communities serve as the foundation on which lifelong patterns of social behaviors are constructed. Helping children with challenging behaviors become fully included is essential for them to grow and thrive in the future.

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Every day during free playtime in an inclusive preschool classroom, David (all names are pseudonyms), a 4-year-old, marches to the block center, takes all the blocks out from the shelf, and scatters them around on the floor. He piles up some long blocks and knocks them down. The classroom is filled with the loud noise of blocks hitting the floor. Teacher's constant verbal reminders are being ignored by David. No other children are able to play in the area because David uses all of the blocks and yells at or even hits those who attempt to touch one. However, during clean up, David runs away and lets the teachers and other children put away the blocks. David is unable to play cooperatively with his peers and is often socially rejected in other children's play.

Knitzer (2002), one in ten young children exhibit challenging behaviors in classroom settings, and this results in the high rates of preschool expulsion due to behavior problems (Gilliam, 2005). In this study, "challenging behavior" for a preschooler can be defined as any behavior that feels overwhelming to and that challenges a child care provider's, child's, or family's sense of competence. These behaviors also limit children's ability to take full advantage of the classroom learning environment. However, it is imperative that we examine the causes of behavior to provide appropriate guidance and never blame the child.

The chance of having a child like David in a classroom is quite high. Teachers report increasing numbers of children with challenging behaviors and their increasing frustration with the negative effects of those behaviors on the dynamic and routine activities of the classroom (Campbell, 2002). Teachers are also expressing the need for training and assistance around managing challenging behaviors (Hemmeter, Corso, & Cheatham, 2006).

Challenging behaviors can happen to children with a variety of abilities in all kinds of settings, and children's early experiences as members of classroom communities serve as the foundation on which lifelong patterns of social behaviors are constructed (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Therefore, helping children with challenging behaviors become fully included is essential for them to grow and thrive in the future. This article examines why challenging behaviors are great obstacles for children's learning and growth in the classrooms and uses four real life examples to demonstrate strategies to prevent and eliminate behavior problems among preschoolers. All strategies are evidence-based and easy to implement by classroom teachers.



Photo by Elizabeth Nichols

"Sharing and cooperative play are crucial to a successful classroom."

Does this sound familiar to you? Do you have a child in your classroom like David? According to Raver &

Addressing challenging behaviors is critical to ensure children's successful preschool learning experiences. Recchia and Lee (2013) stressed that one of the biggest consequences of unaddressed challenging behaviors is social rejection. Children who are socially rejected are likely to "act out" in class, become involved in conflicts with peers, and/or withdraw from any social interaction. These challenging behaviors will, in turn, further hamper social integration and cause more rejections. Noncompliance is another common form of behavior problems (Miles & Wilder, 2009). Research indicates that noncompliance negatively affects children and correlates to having academic and social development struggles. In addition, according to Kalb & Loeber (2003), one of the most important indicators of "school readiness" for preschool and kindergarten children is compliance within the classroom, as evidenced by following teacher's directions. According to Conroy, Dunlap, Clarke, & Alter (2005), not only do challenging behaviors interrupt the classroom dynamics, but if left unaddressed these behaviors will most likely deteriorate, leading to a diagnosis of emotional/behavioral disorder (EBD) or emotional disturbance (ED).

Despite the wide recognition of the need to eliminate challenging behaviors and to help children and classroom teachers, few practical strategies are applicable to everyday preschool teachers due to the lack of adequate training and planning time. According to a detailed literature review on widely used practices for remediating behavior problems by Conroy et al. (2005), there has been an increasing amount of research focused on positive behavioral interventions, which is an umbrella term used for a group intervention

strategies that are "highly individualized, ... and designed to prevent the occurrence of challenging behaviors" (p. 165). However, most of the strategies suggested are not easy for classroom teachers to implement because they require highly specialized trainings or timely and systematic implementations, such as applied behavior analysis. In addition, most of the studies on behavior management did not describe how the results of their behavioral analysis led to the design of the intervention strategies, which would have greatly helped teachers in applying interventions to similar situations. Moreover, only a small part of the interventions reviewed focused on how children behave before they demonstrate challenging behaviors, indicating that the majority of the research deals with the consequences of behavior problems, but not enough attention has been directed at how to prevent the challenging behaviors from happening in the first place.

In an inclusive classroom, there are no "norms."

In the fall of 2013, the authors of this paper had the opportunity to work as student teachers in two preschool inclusive classrooms with 3- and 4-year-olds at a Head Start program in New York City. There the authors had the privilege to meet and teach children like David. After witnessing some children's consistent exclusion within the classrooms and the complex, non-descriptive, and unrealistic strategies in scholarly studies, the authors decided to investigate and implement practical

strategies to minimize behavior problems and its negative impact on the children and the teachers in the preschool classrooms in which we were working.

This research is based upon and aimed at preschool classroom teachers who often do not have a one-on-one aide or other forms of assistance, and who must take full responsibility of all children, including those with challenging behaviors. In this article, the authors will introduce four scenarios of challenging behaviors and offer some practical strategies and tools that were implemented to overcome the challenges we met in the classrooms. These strategies are simple and have been proven effective in managing individual child with consistent behavior problems, and they require no specialized training and only a small amount of planning time.

Strategies to Prevent Challenging Behaviors

Adam is a 3-year-old who has been in his preschool classroom for more than six months. He plays well during playtime and has made some friends in the classroom. However, he never participates in class meetings. Every morning, a teacher has to heavily coax him to the meeting area, sit him down next to her, and keep reminding him to remain seated. One morning, while Adam sat beside a teacher during morning meeting he was being particularly disruptive. He kept moving his body and making incoherent repetitive remarks about a train, which were consistently interrupting the morning meeting activities. When it was time to pick the classroom job of the day on

the job chart, Adam suddenly ran away from the meeting area looking very frustrated. The teacher said, "Come pick your job, Adam! What do you want to do today?" Adam screamed, "No, I hate it! I hate you! I hate school!" while throwing pieces of Lego at the job chart from afar. The assistant teacher had to get up and physically stop him from hurting other children. Adam never came back to join the morning meeting.

Has something familiar happened in your classroom? What triggered Adam's acting out behavior and how can it be prevented it from happening in the first place? To answer these questions, we first need to find out why Adam behaves the way he does, and what function that behavior serves. Long-term systematic observation and analysis of Adam and other children's behavior has informed the authors that the two most common reasons why children engage in undesirable behaviors are either to escape undesired activities and/or to gain access to attention or tangible items, both strongly related to children's communication skills (LaPan, 2014). When a child wants to avoid an uncomfortable situation, to interact with a teacher or a peer, or to play with a favored toy but does not know how to use his words or body language to communicate, he is more likely going to use other ways that are seen as inappropriate to teachers to express himself. Knowing this, we have developed the following strategies to prevent these challenging behaviors before they occur.

What Adam did in the previous anecdote was a typical escape behavior. To find out why he escaped from the morning meeting at that particular time when the children



Photo by Jan Brown

"Working closely with children and understanding their cultural differences is vital to an inclusive classroom."

started to pick their jobs of the day, the teachers met with Adam after naptime when he was most calm to talk about what happened during the morning meeting.

Teacher: Adam, you ran away and threw Legos at us this morning. What happened? You don't like the job chart activity?

Adam: What 'jo-car? I don't like the 'Jo-car' thing. I hate it!

Teacher: No. That is our 'Job Chart,' Adam.

Adam: I don't care!

This short conversation with Adam informed us why he escaped from the morning meeting: he did not have the prerequisite knowledge to know what the job chart activity was, nor was he taught what the job chart was. Adam did not know what was happening or what he was supposed to do which resulted in his frustration and might have even given him a sense of failure. He ran away because he did not understand and wanted to cover up his unknowing. This led to the first strategy to help Adam.

Teaching the "Norms"

Having taught for so long, teachers sometimes tend to make assumptions about what our children should have already known when they arrive in our classrooms. However, children have a variety of abilities and may come from different backgrounds and cultures. They may not know or even be aware of what we consider the "norm knowledge."

For example, in one of the authors' classrooms, a girl named Prishala strongly refused to eat breakfast from time to time when cereal was served. The teachers did not understand why, so they asked her many questions, modeled how to eat with a spoon, and even had her best friend sit next to her during breakfast, but nothing worked. Later, we found out that Prishala's family had just come from a country in North Africa, where she had never had cereal for breakfast. She did not even know what cereal was. If we were more sensitive to her culture and her home life, her behavior problems could have been prevented. As teachers, it is hard to avoid making assumptions based upon our own experiences and

cultural norms, about what we think our children should have known. To help us break down this barrier, we made a Norm Knowledge Checklist of the assumptions that we as teachers could be making and overlooking (See Table 1).

When we tested out the checklist in our classrooms, the results were surprising. Many children did not know that their teacher’s expectations of them change in different settings and classroom routines. They did not know that what they were supposed to do during play-time and meeting time was different, and they were often confused. We found that David did not know how to arrange his legs so he could sit “crisscross applesauce,” James never sang along with the class because he did not know the traditional children songs that many children learned before entering preschool, and Samantha was not aware of the fact that she could look at pictures on the shelf for guidance on where to put away the toys during clean up time. By not knowing the “norm knowledge,” children may be seen as acting out when in fact they may just feel insecure or frustrated. While some children can catch on rather quickly, other children may need clear instructions and time to learn these “norm knowledge.”

Also, an increasing number of children in schools are from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, and “some children are never exposed to dominant cultures and practices so prominently valued in schools prior to entering early education settings” (Mitchell & Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 269). For example, not all children know classic children’s nursery songs like *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* or have played with typical toys like Legos.

Table 1: The Norm Knowledge Checklist

Do all the children in your classroom know these basic skills?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher’s expectations during daily routines <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Do children know what the classroom rules are? ◇ Are there ways to help them remember and follow these rules?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Most children came to the classroom knowing many traditional American children’s songs, like Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, or Itsy Bitsy Spider. However, not all children learn them at home. ◇ We often put up charts like daily schedule, classroom jobs, and children’s birthdays. Do all children know how to read these? ◇ Do all children in the classroom know how to use the toys in the classroom? Some children may not have seen Legos, dominos, or jigsaw puzzles before.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-help skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Do all children know how to eat with the utensils the classroom provides? ◇ Do they know how to wash their hands, how to use the toilet, or how to set their cot before nap time in the United States?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Norms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Do all children celebrate American holidays? Do they know what Halloween or Thanksgiving is? ◇ Do they eat the same type of food the school provides at home?

Moreover, they may not celebrate Halloween or Thanksgiving and do not know about American food. Early childhood educators should be culturally aware by not making assumptions of what children have already known and being sensitive to children’s cultural backgrounds.

Not only did teaching the “norms” help us prevent many behavior problems, but it also gave us a great opportunity to re-think and re-learn about what “norms” are. In an inclusive classroom where everybody is different in their unique ways, there are no “norms.” Acknowledging everyone’s uniqueness will bring the class together and

help us build a stronger classroom community.

Ease Transitions

George is a 4-year-old preschooler. Although he has been in this preschool for over a year now, he still has great difficulty transitioning from one activity to another. Teachers often have to give him many prompts to stay on task, and even then, it is not likely that he will do so. This often results in classroom delays. One day during morning meeting, George delayed the class as he continuously sang the “Good Morning” song well

after it was finished. His teacher told him, "We may not be able to go to the park if we keep singing. We need to keep our listening ears on." This only stopped George for a minute. George continued to sing. To ignore the teacher's reminders, he covered his ears and sang even louder. His teacher said, "George, I'm going to ask you to sit with me today because you are not listening to my words. We have to get ready to go to the park" George did not go and sit with the teacher until the direction was given for the third time. He then disrupted the class again by crawling over his peers to sit in the teacher's lap.

How long do you spend transitioning throughout the day? Try to track the amount of time that you spend each day during transitions. It can be easy to underestimate the amount of time spent during transition periods. Challenging behaviors often occur during transitions, when children are feeling stressed because they do not know what to do, frustrated because they have to leave their favorite toys behind, or overwhelmed by the noise

level and the disorder of the classroom. According to Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, and Kinder (2008) "designing a schedule that minimizes transitions and maximizes the time children spend engaged in developmentally appropriate activities is the first step in decreasing challenging behavior" (p. 3).

Use Music and Movement during Transitions

Music and movement have a powerful influence on young children. To effectively transition the class after circle time, we often made a class train where each child held onto another child's back, with the children to collectively lead them to the next activity by dropping them off at different places as we progressed through the classroom, whether it is to their cubbies, small group tables or outside. This helped children line up quickly and made it fun for the whole group.

Movement Helper

Another tool to help children transition to a different area of the classroom is to have a "movement

helper." A "movement helper" is one of the classroom jobs. During transitions, we called on the movement helper first and invited him to make a movement which then the rest of the classroom would have to follow in the same way as they are called one by one. For example, the teacher calls out, "Maggie, you're the movement helper today. Show us how you're going to move." Maggie takes big stomping steps to her area and the teacher remarks, "What giant stomping feet you have, Maggie! Who else is sitting ready so that they can show us their big stomping feet?" This strategy can help make transitions effective and engaging.

Provide Visual Cues of What to Do

Some children have a hard time during transition because they do not know what to do while everyone else seems so busy. To ease their frustration, we used pictures and timers to give children clear directions. As not every child understood the picture schedule in the classroom, and even if they did, a classroom schedule often had more than ten activities, of which can be easy to lose track. Replacing the abstract drawings in our classroom schedule with real pictures of the class helped many children. We also created a new classroom job, called "the schedule monitor." This child was responsible for moving a clip on the schedule to the next activity before any transition occurred. The schedule monitor was a very popular job among children.

To make both teachers and students aware of the amount of time we spent on each transition, we used a large sand timer during all transitional periods. By doing so, children were visually able to stay on task



Photo by Nancy Alexander

"Smooth transitions reduce stress on children and reduce the opportunity for disruptive behavior."

Table 2 A Sample Positive Reinforcer Book: *David Likes to Play!*

Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting the stage Stating the first behavior goal: Working with a friend 	“David is a friend in Classroom #1. His favorite toys are Legos and blocks. He is very good at building animal farms. We wonder if he could teach a friend how to build an animal farm next week.”
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge David’s progress on the previous behavior goal. Setting the next goal: Learn how to share toys 	“On Tuesday, David and Marc played with the blocks and farm animals. Although there was some disagreement between them, they made a beautiful farm with the teacher’s help. They are working really hard on how to share toys.”
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to reinforce previous goals Setting new goals: join classroom clean up 	“Last Wednesday, when Meimei had no train to play with, David shared one of his trains with Meimei. What a good friend David becomes! Let’s see if David will help Meimei and another friend clean up next week!”
Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge David’s progress, no matter how little. Continue setting the previous goal: clean up. 	“David put away two triangle blocks on Monday before he said he was too tired. Meimei and Tony helped him cleaned up the rest of the blocks. Cleaning up is such a fun activity and we can learn so much from it! We hope David do not lose this wonderful opportunity to learn next week!”

Note: This example shows only the text of the first four weeks of the book. A real book should include pictures showing the target child showing positive behaviors. Teacher could also include a small drawing at the corner of every page illustrating next week’s behavior goal.

during transitions and were encouraged when they were able to be faster than their previous time.

Minimize Waiting Time

Children are active by nature. As teachers, we need to acknowledge their natural instinct to move around. When children are held up in the classroom waiting for others to get ready, they are more likely to engage in some activities that seem inappropriate or unacceptable to teachers. A good way to prevent such behaviors is to keep the waiting children busy with songs, stories, and movements. If the teacher is busy during transitions and has no time to lead children in singing or movements, there are many children-initiated activities can be utilized. Even if the teacher does not know many children’s games, he/she can ask the children in the classroom, as they are all experts!

Strategies to Minimize Existing Behavior Challenges

The strategies we previously discussed can be used to prevent behavior problems from happening in the first place. However, not everything can be prevented and when a child already exhibits challenging behaviors, such as David, as mentioned in the beginning of this article, then teachers must come up with strategies to replace those challenging behaviors with positive ones.

Negotiating a behavior contract is a strategy often used by teachers with children who have significant behavior problems. However, a behavior contract does not usually work as well with very young children. Additionally, programs such as Head Start and curricula like High

Scope believe that internal motivation should be used exclusively and therefore do not promote the use of any external reward or token system (Whiltshire, 2013).

So how then do we motivate children to change their behaviors? Besides using constant praise and attention, is there another way that consistently reminds children of their behavior goals and the teacher’s expectations? One strategy we tried was making use of a teacher-made *positive reinforcer* book (see Table 2) within the classroom. The result proved promising.

Positive Reinforcer Books

A positive reinforcer book is easy to create, fun to use, and effective in eliminating undesirable behaviors and improve many other aspects of young children’s learning. It is an

expanding classroom book made by the teacher. Every week the teacher negotiates a behavior goal with one or more children in the classroom, takes pictures of them exhibiting the agreed upon behavior goal, and records it in the book. The teacher adds one page for each child each week, which includes a picture of him/her demonstrating positive behavior, a short text describing the picture, and a goal for the next week. Teachers can make a book with all the children in it or even separate books for each student who needs one. Table 2 shows the text of the first few weeks of David's positive reinforcer book *David Likes to Play*. As a class, we would read and discuss the book once a week, and with David, we would read it to him daily. The book made the teacher's expectation for David easy to understand and remember, provided positive attention for him, and most importantly, it helped us notice David's progress every week. When a child is demonstrating consistent behavior issues like David, teachers can become overly focused on a child's problems and often overlook his/hers progress. By recording the child's progress each week, teachers are able to notice even the smallest improvement that the child has made which motivates both parties.

Children in our classroom all loved their positive reinforcer books. We made one for the entire class, in which each week we featured one or two children, as well as two separate ones for David and Adam, who needed personalized intervention books. A positive reinforcer book is just like a behavior contract, but easier to understand and more meaningful to young children. Children loved seeing themselves in books and writing stories about themselves. The children would often read and refer

to their books during free play, and some children even conducted dramatic plays according to the books. At the end of the semester, children were able to make their own books. These books not only promote positive behaviors, but also develop literacy skills, increase children's self-confidence, and help them become authors at an early age.

Improve Self-Regulation Skill with a "Quiet Corner" and "Breaks"

Another common cause of behavior problems is difficulty with impulse control. Some children react quickly and aggressively to situations that cause frustration. In the previous anecdote, Adam was not able to control his impulses when he encountered a frustrating situation, so in order to express his feelings he screamed and threw toys. Children who lack self-regulation skills often become frustrated easily and so they throw tantrums and instigate conflicts with peers. Bodrova and Leong (2006) report that the "lack of social-emotional regulation is associated with aggression, lack of social skills, emotional outburst, inattention, and feeling of being overwhelmed" (p. 204). This prevents them from being socially included in the classroom community and learning the necessary skills to be a part of it.

In order to help children like Adam and David develop better impulse control; we set up a "quiet corner" in the classroom where children could retreat to when they were frustrated, sad, or scared. The quiet corner is set up in a low traffic and relatively isolated area. If necessary, noise-canceling headphones can be provided in the "quiet corner," however, stimulating toys should

not be placed in or near the area. For children who needed it, we also provided punching bags (beanbags) as sensory relief for aggression (for more information on this topic please see Schaefer & Mattei, 2005).

Breaks and quiet corners should not be used as a way to give time-outs. Children should be able to decide when to go in and leave the quiet corner. Teachers may suggest the use of a quiet corner to a child when he or she needs it, but should not in any circumstances demand a child to go to the quiet corner.

Conclusion

As early childhood teachers, you may have already realized that the children in your classroom are more diverse than ever. A general education classroom often has children with IEPs, children who speak languages other than English, and those who are from different cultural backgrounds. However, physically enrolling children in a classroom does not guarantee that they will be able to be part of the classroom community. In order to help all children, including the ones who demonstrate challenging behaviors, it is critical to keep the classroom an inclusive and welcoming learning community.

The strategies introduced in this article are easy to implement and require only a small amount of planning. These strategies not only help teachers manage the classroom, but also help teachers to see the sparkle in every child and to find the joy and confidence in teaching children with a variety of abilities and from diversified background. We sincerely hope all teachers realize that all classrooms can be truly inclusive, and that all teaching should tend to each child's need.

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