



Five Things to Know About Challenging Behavior

Emily Potts Callejas & Mary Watson Avery

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Whether it is a tantrum in the supermarket or a refusal to participate in Circle Time, responding to challenging behavior in young children can be one of the most common – and yet toughest part of being a parent or an early childhood educator. The fact that challenging behaviors are a healthy part of early childhood development can be of little solice when a child's repeated actions are frustrating, upsetting, or just plain confusing. It is helpful therefore, to develop a common understanding of challenging behavior that can be shared between early childhood educators and families. Below we have provided useful language, strategies, and tips for parents and teachers to help better understand and address common challenging behaviors in children.

1. All behavior -- even challenging behavior-- is communication

Sometimes when children “act out” we want to ignore it and think it’s just a phase. However, “acting out” is a child’s way of communicating. Acknowledging a child’s feelings—even when those feelings might be expressed through a tantrum—is an important step in connecting to a child and helping him/her to manage their own feelings. “When you can, find a way for time-out or a hug in a rocking chair to break the cycle of [aggressive] buildup. It will help you [the adult] as well. As you stop [the child], say, “I’m sorry. I love you, but not what you are doing.” (Brazelton 2006, p. 147). Acknowledging a child’s frustration or angry feelings helps the child understand that you see that he/she is communicating something to you, the adult. Taking time out to discuss challenging behavior is one way both the child and adult will better understand each other and have improved communication. Visit <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/tips-tools-challenging-behaviors.html> for more resources on challenging behaviors in young children.

2. Challenging behavior is more than just annoying – it’s a demonstration of skill

When young children display challenging behaviors such as pinching or screaming, it is often because they do not know how to describe what they are feeling by using their words. Very young children do not have the language to express their needs, and may turn to tantrums to express discomfort or hunger, or biting to express frustration. It is important to understand that while annoying, challenging behavior is also a child’s way of showing us how they are able to express themselves, which gives a starting point in how we can support them. Visit http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/bkpk_biting.pdf for more resources on the topic.

3. Social skills can and should be taught

Research shows that when children are taught the key skills they need to understand their emotions and the emotions of others, handle conflicts, problem solve, and develop relationships with peers, their problem behavior decreases and their social skills improve (Joseph & Strain 2003). Young children must be given the tools to know how to navigate the world around them. Parents and educators should be trained – or seek guidance—in helping children to gain these skills. Parents visit http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/bkpk_teachable_moments.

[pdf](#) for further resources on the topic.

Teacher resources on the topic can be found here

http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/yc_article_11_2006.pdf

4. *Children do things for attention because they need your attention*

When a child throws yogurt onto the floor, he is doing so to tell you something. When a child cries in the crib, she is trying to get your attention. There are many reasons for challenging behavior, for example: a developmental surge, medical reasons, biological reasons, the social emotional environment, discontinuity between care program and home, lack of skill in communicating and interacting with others, and/or a combination of factors. Understanding the reason behind challenging behavior in young children is empowering for parents and teachers, and helps adults to feel more confident in their parenting and/or teaching. Visit <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb19.pdf> for more information on supporting young children in expressing their wants and needs.

5. *Building nurturing relationships is one of the most powerful tools in preventing and addressing challenging behavior*

The focus of parents and early childhood educators should be on assisting children in getting their needs met rather than eliminating the challenging behavior. In order to support this goal, adults must place priority on building relationships with the children who are in their care. The place to start is to establish trust with the young child by getting to know him or her. For example, a teacher might incorporate family photos into circle time to elicit stories from children about their families and loved ones. Having a deeper understanding of the child as an individual enables that young child to feel safe, loved, and therefore trusting of the adults in his/her life. Mutual trust and understanding provides the basis for a relationship where a child can explore all aspects of growing up, including experiencing joy, frustration, fear, curiosity, happiness and love. Teacher resources on the topic can be found here

<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb12.pdf> and here

https://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201109/Rocking%20and%20Rolling_Online_0911.pdf

Visit <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/social-emotional-development/tips-for-promoting-social-emotional-development.html> for parent resources on the topic.

Next time you feel tested, confused, or frustrated with a little one, consider taking a deep breath and wondering aloud about what the child is trying to tell you. A tantrum communicates a lot of information. It's up to the grown-ups to unlock that meaning and help young children feel understood.

Emily Potts Callejas, EdM, is the Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Content Manager of Wheelock College's Connected Beginnings Training Institute. Emily's career has focused on working with administrators, teachers, parents, and children in culturally and geographically diverse educational environments to improve educational opportunities. Emily holds an EDM in Risk & Prevention from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a BA in History from Barnard College. Contact Emily at ecallejas@wheelock.edu.

Mary Watson Avery, MS, is the Senior Program Director of Wheelock College's Aspire Institute, in addition to leading the Connected Beginnings Training Institute. Mary has over 25 years experience as a teacher and administrator serving young children and their families. She is a trainer and coach of educators, focusing on building reflective practice, promoting social emotional development and wellness, preventing and addressing challenging behavior, and providing effective parent engagement. Contact Mary at mavery@wheelock.edu.

To learn more about the Aspire Institute:

www.wheelock.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/aspire-institute

To learn more about the Connected Beginnings Training Institute:

www.connectedbeginnings.org

To learn more about Wheelock College:

www.wheelock.edu

References:

<https://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200611/BTJFoxLentini.pdf>

Joseph, G. E., & Strain, P. S. (2003). [Enhancing emotional vocabulary in young children](#). *Young Exceptional Children*, 6(4), 18-26.

Brazelton, B., & Sparrow, J. (2006). [Touchpoints Birth to Three. Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development](#).

Resources:

<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

<http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/index.htm>

<http://www.zerotothree.org/>