

# “How Can I Help You?”: Reconsidering Behavior Management

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As Sophia, a first-year teacher, begins setting up her inclusive preschool classroom, she has a number of concerns swirling through her head. How should she arrange her classroom? What should her schedule look like? Will the children’s families like her? Amidst all these questions, one seems most pressing: How can she establish a behavior management system that will help each child succeed and also contribute to a consistent and supportive classroom community? As Sophia reflects on the classrooms she saw as a student-teacher, she wonders what strategies she should include in her classroom: A reward system with stickers or a treasure box? Individual behavior charts? A visual tracking system with clips or cards? And how can she make sure that all the children will feel good about themselves at the end of the day?

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Like Sophia, when we taught kindergarten and preschool, we started the school year wondering how to create a behavior management system that would work for a wide variety of children. While many program- and school-wide models exist, early childhood teachers often struggle to find one that focuses on motivation. Motivation is hugely important if we want to understand, engage, lead, and connect with young children. Specifically, motivation is key to effective behavior management in inclusive classrooms.

Given that many teachers feel they are not well prepared to manage behaviors in a classroom (Pavri 2004), we have intentionally pursued this topic in our professional endeavors as teacher educators, observing hundreds of preservice and in-service teachers and providing professional development and instruction around the topic of motivation. One aspect of a modern theory of motivation that many teachers we have worked with have noted as especially helpful is *self-determination theory*. This article discusses how lessons from this theory can be applied in the classroom through behavior management practices that engage children more fully in school and produce long-term behavior improvements.

# What is self-determination theory?

Self-determination theory is a conceptual framework for understanding human development. As the name suggests, it posits that development is an active process, taking place as individuals interact with the environment around them. The theory has support from numerous studies conducted across widely varying disciplines (Deci & Ryan 2000; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens 2010).

Self-determination theory states that all individuals have both physiological and psychological needs that drive them. When the environment fulfills those needs, the individual develops optimally. When the environment does not provide for those needs, one of two things can happen: either development will be restrained and sense of well-being reduced, or the individual will find maladaptive ways to fulfill the need. Let's think about food, for example. When this basic need is not met, children either experience malnutrition, which negatively impacts their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, or they resort to maladaptive ways to get food, like stealing it.

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While our physiological needs have been well understood for some time, what self-determination theory contributes to the discussion is that it defines innate psychological needs. Among researchers who study self-determination theory, there are three needs that are widely agreed upon—autonomy, relatedness, and competence. In this context, *autonomy* refers to agency and an internal locus of control. We all have a need to be in control of our lives and to resist being controlled by others. *Relatedness* refers to the drive to connect in a positive way with other people in our environments. *Competence* refers to the need not only to have an effect on the world around us but also to succeed in the tasks we undertake.

For behavior management in classrooms, self-determination theory calls into question programs that use external rewards and punishments (e.g., prize boxes, clip charts). Specifically, the theory suggests that external motivators serve to frustrate children's fulfillment of their three universal psychological needs.

When we use rewards or punishments to shape children's behaviors, we are removing some of their autonomy. That is, we are controlling them rather than allowing them to control themselves. When children feel controlled by others rather than feeling in control of themselves, they will either experience decreased well-being (e.g., they may like school less) or find maladaptive ways to fulfill their need for autonomy (e.g., they may push back against teacher control or misbehave).

Many teachers find ways to share autonomy with their students. For example, teachers may give children choices regarding what learning station they might want to engage in first. The teacher maintains control over the tasks the child must complete, and the children feel they have some control because they choose which station to go to first. The teacher in the opening vignette, Sophia, might support a child's autonomy by asking "Would you prefer to go to the sensory table or the block area?," letting the student decide. Consistently offering choices like this fosters a sense of autonomy, which in turn curbs the emergence of maladaptive behaviors, like when a child goes to the block center but throws the blocks instead of building with them.

Using external rewards and punishments also impacts children's ability to fulfill their need for relatedness, particularly with regard to their relationships with their teachers. Using rewards or punishments changes the fundamental, underlying nature of the educational relationship. In most classrooms, the relationships between teachers and children are social (i.e., based on genuine warmth and caring). Throughout the school year, teachers often use their personal relationships to motivate students to comply with requests—children are internally motivated because they care about their teachers and they know their teachers care about them. Using external motivators changes the relationship from social to economic (Heyman & Ariely 2004). Over time, children may stop looking to their teachers for caring and support and start looking to them for rewards. The rewards are transactional—they don't increase the children's sense of relatedness.

If Sophia were to hand out plastic charms to recognize children who did something well, students might stop helping one another out of a shared sense of community and start helping only for the sake of a trinket. Because the underlying nature of the teacher-child relationship has been changed, the classroom environment is no longer fulfilling children's need for personal connection with others. This lack of fulfillment results in children who are disconnected from their teachers, which negatively affects the children's motivation, development, and sense of well-being (Ryan & Deci 2000).



There are also negative consequences for children's feelings of competence when educators use external rewards or punishments. Just as we want children to have a sense of autonomy when making choices, we also want them to have a sense of ownership over their accomplishments. For example, there is typically a period of time between when a child uses only drawings to tell a story and when he feels competent enough to add letters to represent what he wants to say. As an emergent writer, the child is no longer satisfied with the drawing telling the story—but his feeling of competence as a writer is not yet strong. These budding feelings of competence may be subject to change if Sophia were to start awarding stickers for a job well done. The child might no longer be concerned about what he finds to be good enough, but instead wonder how Sophia will respond: *Is it not my best work because I did not add words or because the teacher did not give me a sticker?* Or conversely, *Is it my best work because the teacher said it was?* In contrast, consider how the emergent writer would feel if Sophia had not ever offered an external reward and had instead expressed interest in his story. If Sophia had asked to hear the story and smiled invitingly while asking follow-up questions, she would have supported the child's developing sense of competence. Instead of evaluating the work, Sophia could ask the preschooler if he wanted to add this story and drawing to his portfolio that he shares with his family. This makes the child the arbiter of what is good enough—and increases internal motivation because of the desire to show one's best work to important people like family members.

## Using self-determination theory to increase internal motivation

If the use of rewards is not helpful in the long run, how do we fulfill children's psychological needs in classroom contexts in a way that promotes internal motivation for positive behaviors?

## Autonomy

Teachers can support children's need for autonomy through choice and collaboration. This can come in the form of cognitive choices, in which teachers enable children to choose the topics on which their learning will focus—like Sophia inviting the children to decide what items (like rocks or leaves) they want to bring back from a nature hike to observe at the science center; procedural choices, in which teachers provide students with options for how to present their learning and knowledge—such as Sophia allowing children to point to or vocalize what they want for snack; and organizational forms of choice, in which teachers allow children to make decisions about their personal needs and comfort or about how they will conduct themselves in the classroom—like Sophia asking the children to choose their own discussion partners (Stefanou et al. 2004). In each case, it is important for teachers to accompany children's autonomy with structure (Jang, Reeve, & Deci 2010) by communicating clear boundaries and expectations.

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We saw this in action in a first grade classroom we visited last year. The teacher, Hailey, had cultivated a large classroom library, which she had initially organized into carefully labeled tubs. However, the books were constantly being misplaced, which caused concern among the children when they could not find their favorite books quickly. Instead of constantly reorganizing them herself, Hailey asked the children to take the lead in solving the problem. A subcommittee was convened, and the children reorganized the library into categories that made sense to them. Tubs labeled “Fiction Books with Animals as Characters,” “Famous People,” and “If You Give A . . .” replaced the more typical genre-specific labels Hailey had used. The children also added “librarian” to the list of class jobs so that the tubs were monitored on a weekly basis. This both solved the problem and allowed the children to exercise their autonomy in making crucial decisions that impacted them (and their ability to find those *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* books faster!).

## Relatedness

Meeting children's needs for relatedness can be contrasted with using praise in the classroom. Children often interpret teachers' praise as representative of our feelings toward them. Praise and rewards are, by definition, conditional (e.g., do this and I will give you that). But children need to know that we love and care for them regardless of

what happens on a day to day basis. While we communicate this fact verbally and directly, children also infer it from the way we treat them. Often, our interactions with children are friendly and amiable. Other times, particularly when children's behavior is challenging, we reveal our frustration and our need to control their behavior.

When we show irritation with children's behavior, we send children mixed messages about how we really feel about them. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to remain calm, even when dealing with very difficult situations. By recognizing that we are in control of how we feel (Bailey 2015), no child can make us feel any way other than the way we want to. It may take some practice, but if we wish to be calm and composed, that is entirely within our power. By remaining calm, we can take the opportunity to respond to challenging situations in a caring and sensitive manner. We can teach children behavior the same way we teach them reading, writing, math, or science. When we do this in a way that is respectful and responsive, we show children that we care about them and want to help them become better people—thereby fulfilling their need for relatedness.

Doing this requires teachers to make time to intentionally build relationships with the children. Although program structures and time allocations vary widely, all teachers have opportunities to do this. For example, when we both taught kindergarten, we invited small groups of children to eat with us in the classroom two days a week. We also began playing with the children at recess instead of merely observing them. Some teachers who excel at building relationships with children take time at the beginning or end of the day to talk individually with children about their lives, asking about beloved pets, siblings, interests, and extracurricular activities. Exceptional teachers keep track of what they learn to ensure they are considering the whole child, and they use that information in their instruction to make the content even more meaningful for their students. Regardless of when teachers find time in their day, building relationships with children requires thought and intentionality so that the time may be effectively used to connect with students as people.

## Competence

When we think about competence, we often connect it to academic learning. For example, children who feel competent reading stories tend to enjoy reading more, which then leads to higher levels of reading achievement (Stutz, Schaffner, & Schiefele 2016). Many teachers understand and acknowledge this virtuous cycle; they structure their pedagogy accordingly, fulfilling the children's need for competence in order to promote reading engagement. But behavior management is rarely treated this way—practitioners tend to consider the ability to behave well to be a prerequisite for learning (Bailey 2015). However, research suggests teachers would be more successful in developing children's

social skills and behavior if they approached social, emotional, and behavioral development in the same way that they approach academic development, through explicit instruction and practice (Hemmeter et al. 2016).



For example, let's consider how Sophia could support Kevin, a preschooler who frequently hits children who sit near him on the carpet during circle time. Sophia could begin by recognizing that Kevin does not currently have the knowledge or skills necessary to keep his hands to himself during their whole group activities. Next, she could talk with Kevin about what is happening before he hits someone and how he feels in that moment. Sophia could then provide strategies to help him calm down or act on his feelings in a more appropriate way, scaffolding his social and emotional understanding to help him learn new behaviors. Sophia may place Kevin immediately next to her on the carpet and the child next to Kevin just slightly beyond Kevin's reach. As Kevin practices his new skills, Sophia may give him detailed feedback about how well he is meeting expectations and, based on his performance, work with him to explore new strategies. Rather than seeing Kevin and herself in opposition, Sophia remains calm and focuses on the primary goal of helping Kevin. She is fulfilling Kevin's need for competence, thereby promoting his well-being and engagement in the classroom community.

## Conclusion

When we present the content of this article, which we have done hundreds of times with thousands of early childhood professionals, we generally receive one of two reactions: "I'm already doing all of that" or "That's too radical a change for me." In reality, of the hundreds of educators we have observed, there are very few people who are already managing behavior by consistently focusing on children's psychological needs and even fewer who cannot shift their practices to more effectively meet children's needs. For those



in the first group, it is important to think about intentionality and regularity. If you are already doing these things consistently, then the emotional climate of your classroom will bear this out. Behavior issues should be minimal and your relationships with children should be positive from both your viewpoint and the children's.

For teachers in the second group, we recommend starting small. For example, one group of teachers dedicated to this work began by changing the way they approached conversations with children. Instead of asking children who used maladaptive behaviors what they were doing or immediately criticizing them, they calmly asked, "Do you need some help?" In doing so, the teachers consistently showed the children that they cared about them, supported the children's need for relatedness, and ensured that the children had some autonomy in the discussion. This practice also put teachers in the right mindset to have a productive conversation rather than reacting negatively to what they initially perceived. The change made an enormous difference in relationships throughout the school and resulted in a sharp decrease in behavior issues.

*When we teach behavior in a way that is respectful and responsive, we show children we care about them and want to help them become better people.*

Self-determination theory offers teachers a new lens on classroom practice that increases children's engagement, promotes children's sense of well-being, and leads to more positive developmental trajectories. While fulfilling children's needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence may seem inconsistent with some widespread practices—or simply hasn't been prioritized when considering behavior management options—making small changes over time to better meet those needs allows teachers to more effectively support the whole child. Sometimes, it only takes the question "How can I help you?" to put a teacher on the best path to managing children's behavior.

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**Audience:** *Teacher*

**Age:** *Kindergarten, Preschool*

**Topics:** *Child Development, Social and Emotional Development, Guidance and Challenging Behaviors, Other Topics, Developmentally Appropriate Practice, YC*

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