

Responses to Challenging Behavior: Why Some Common Strategies Don't Work and What to Do Instead

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Children's challenging behavior occurs for a variety of reasons. They may be frustrated by something they can't do yet (explain their feelings, write the first letter in their name), or they may be tired, hungry, sad, or just excited.

All behavior is trying to tell us something, so think about what might be causing or be connected to a child's behavior when deciding the best way to address it.

When faced with challenging behavior, **it's important to focus on teaching new skills and reinforcing desired behaviors.** When challenging behavior is replaced with appropriate skills, positive change is sure to follow!

Talented teachers who struggle with children's challenging behavior often turn to techniques they have observed, experienced, or been taught to use, only to discover that these methods don't work! Read on for practical, effective alternatives to try instead.

Use logical consequences

Instead of threatening to use a consequence that you can't or won't enforce ("If you do not clean up the blocks, I will remove them from the classroom."),

Try this:

- Say what you mean and mean what you say. Be clear and consistent.
- Develop logical consequences, promise them, and use them. (“If you don’t clean up the blocks, you can’t use them anymore today.”)
- Reinforce desired behaviors. (“Now no one will step on the blocks and get hurt.”)

Why?

- Setting limits encourages children to test boundaries; it’s how they learn what is and is not appropriate.
- When behavior is not followed by the promised consequence, limits become unclear and inconsistent. Children learn that you do not mean what you say (and will continue to test you).

Speak calmly

Instead of speaking in a loud or threatening tone of voice,

Try this:

- Take a minute so everyone can calm down.
- Speak quietly; bend down to the child’s level.
- Calmly state the problem using “I messages.” (“When children fight over toys, I feel afraid someone will get hurt.”)

Why?

- Yelling isn't an effective way to communicate. Children hear your volume rather than your message.
- Yelling scares children and makes them feel unsupported. It affects a child's willingness to problem solve with you.
- Yelling may actually lead to an increase in undesired behaviors.

Allow active play regardless of behavior



Instead of keeping a child from participating in outside (or other active) time as a consequence of undesirable behavior,

Try this:

- Review often with the children rules and expectations for recess. They should make sense to children and, ideally, be rules they have helped create.

- Acknowledge and reinforce desired behaviors.
- Apply logical consequences for breaking classroom and recess rules, such as limiting access to certain activities instead of denying a child recess altogether. For example, a child who jumps from the slide is not allowed to use the slide for the rest of the day.

Why?

- Missing recess deprives the brain of a necessary break (needed to reset and start fresh).
- Engaging in physical and unstructured play enhances children's cognitive, physical, and social and emotional development.
- Being physically active is a healthy outlet for energy that otherwise might contribute to challenging classroom behavior.

Discuss issues privately

Instead of posting charts in the classroom ranking each child's behavior (stoplight chart),

Try this:

- Discuss issues privately with children; be calm and supportive as you help them develop self-control.
- Have a planned set of logical consequences that you use consistently. ("If you crash Georgie's blocks, you need to move to a different center.")
- Rank the class as a whole, and use your observations as a reflection tool for the children. ("It sounds loud in here to me. What can we do to move the volume back to green?")

Why?

- Individual charts are embarrassing. Imagine your supervisor observing you teaching a lesson, then hanging a stoplight outside your door so everyone (children, parents, and other teachers) knows how well you did.
- Charts address undesired, rather than desired, behaviors. They don't speak to the underlying issue or teach a social skill.

Reinforce appropriate behavior

Instead of humiliating a child or hurting a child's feelings in an attempt to change a challenging behavior (saying "Do you need to go back to the baby class?" or writing names of children who do not listen on a board for the whole class to see),

Try this:

- Reinforce appropriate behaviors (sitting quietly during circle time) rather than shaming children for behaviors like being noisy and poking other children. Teach children the skills they're lacking, and give them opportunities to practice. Help a child recognize when she's feeling like she wants to poke a friend and give her ideas of what to do instead—take a few breaths, roll her shoulders.
- If appropriate, ignore undesired behaviors.

Why?

- Children feel belittled and disrespected.
- Children may think teachers don't like them or resent the teachers who make them feel ashamed.
- Shaming gives children reasons to pick on peers.

Redirect

Instead of sending children to sit alone in an assigned space for a set period of time (time-out) to think about their behavior,

Try this:

- Redirect the child toward a more appropriate behavior (walking instead of running). Be supportive—this is not a punishment!
- Teach effective and appropriate replacement skills. (“We ask when we want to use a friend’s crayon.”)
- Time-out is useful if it is child initiated; it should last only as long as it takes the child to calm down. Adults can give themselves time-outs (taking deep breaths and spending a few minutes away from children), and support children in learning to take a break.

Why?

- Time-out does not teach appropriate behavior skills. Children often engage in challenging behavior when they don’t know more appropriate and effective ways to express themselves.
- Children might enjoy time-out and use it to escape from other activities.

Partner with families to let children know you are all working together to help them succeed. Tell parents about the behaviors you’re seeing in the classroom and what strategies you’re using so they can try those strategies at home. Ask parents what behaviors they see at home and collaborate to be consistent. Remember to stay positive.

Overall, to be successful, children need compassionate and caring adults who guide and support them. This leads to children learning appropriate, effective ways of expressing their feelings to get what they want and need.

Audience: *Teacher*

Age: *Preschool*

Topics: *Child Development, Social and Emotional Development, Guidance and Challenging Behaviors, TYC*

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