

Helping Your Staff Find Effective Alternatives

It isn't easy to change teachers' attitudes about the effectiveness of their responses to challenging behavior. They often feel they've tried everything, and the only thing that works is removing the child from the activity, the group, or the classroom. Help them to understand that punishing one child has a negative impact on all the children and creates a very negative classroom culture. It's up to you to help them feel comfortable with alternatives to punishment—which, incidentally, will be more effective.

What Your Teachers Need to Know

What guidance can you give to your teachers about the numerous strategies that claim to address challenging behavior? First of all, talk with them about what they feel a strategy should accomplish, and ask if they think that their own responses in actual situations are meeting those criteria. Point out that no strategy, no matter how effective it may be, will work unless teachers

- › Cultivate a strong, positive relationship with every child in their group
- › Create an inclusive, prosocial climate and ensure that the program is developmentally appropriate and individualized so that every child can succeed (see Chapter 6)
- › Stay in control of their own emotions and know how to deal with an amygdala hijack
- › Address the child's behavior, not the child herself
- › Are flexible and patient, but maintain high expectations
- › Look for the message the child is communicating with her behavior, as well as the skills she requires to meet her needs appropriately
- › Start fresh every day, even if yesterday was a disaster (Kaiser & Rasminsky 2017)

WHAT A STRATEGY SHOULD ACCOMPLISH

In *FLIP IT!* Rachel Sperry (2011, 16) tells us that a strategy should

- › “Help to strengthen the teacher’s relationship with the child.”
- › “Address the root cause or the feelings behind the behavior.”
- › “Help the child learn how to [recognize and] control his/her emotions.”
- › “Help the child to become a problem-solver.”
- › “Help make long-term changes in the child’s behavior.”

Know Your Teachers

Every teacher is different. For some, keeping control of the classroom through rules and consequences is important, while others are happier providing fewer rules and offering children more choices (see Chapter 3). These views come from the teacher's own personality, experience, culture, and values, and they influence how he sees his role when challenging behavior occurs. It's important to work with each educator to find strategies that will support the child but won't compromise his beliefs. Most will be comfortable using natural and logical consequences and several other possibilities discussed in this chapter. When teachers have several strategies at their command, they can select the one that best fits the child and the circumstances—and if that approach doesn't work, they will have another to try.

Inform Yourself

Being well informed is another of a leader's basic responsibilities. You probably know more than your teachers about most things to do with early childhood education, and in particular you should know more about effective ways to address challenging behavior. This obliges you to keep your eyes and ears open for new ideas and research—to read books and journals and follow social media sites and blogs, always checking to make sure that your sources are reliable.

Your role also dictates that you belong to professional and community organizations and go to conferences and workshops, especially those that your teachers are attending. When they return to school excited about new theories and techniques, you have to know what they're talking about and be ready to help them put their ideas into practice.

In addition, it's essential for you to network with other administrators on a regular basis. You'll get to know about the resources in your area, and as a group, you may be able to afford to bring in professional development providers. (See Chapter 8 for more about professional development.)

Set a Positive Tone

Helping your teachers to maintain a positive attitude (and maintaining one yourself) is another key to supporting them. There is so much anger and frustration in dealing with challenging behavior day after day that teachers need tools to keep themselves going, give themselves a push, and prevent secondary traumatic stress, a condition that can be brought on by helping children and families exposed to trauma (Erdman & Colker with Winter 2020). (See Chapter 13.) Urge your teachers to get this boost by practicing self-reflection, journaling, or mindfulness (see Chapter 5) and by participating in regular staff meetings where they can speak freely and honestly and get input from you and their colleagues or look back and see that the child with challenging behavior really is making progress. All of this will enable your educators to pinpoint exactly which skills and professional development they need. (See Chapter 8.)

To keep everyone's mood up, it helps to plan some wacky days, like pajama or backwards day. Arrange some social gatherings or retreats where people can just relax, have a good time, and enjoy being together.

The Importance of Responding to Early Signs of Challenging Behavior

As we've said, challenging behavior doesn't come out of nowhere. Most teachers can tell as soon as a child arrives in the morning that he is likely to have a difficult day, but they haven't really thought about *how* they know this. Indeed, teachers can see challenging behavior in its embryonic form when they observe signs of anxiety, which they can recognize when they know a child well. Encourage them to notice and record how each child looks when he's feeling good about himself, interacting comfortably with his peers, and doing something he enjoys. At the same time, they should document just how the child looks when his expression or behavior changes, indicating that he's anxious and taking his first steps toward challenging behavior.

Help your teachers to look for these typical signs of anxiety:

- › Physiology: tears, frequent urination, clenched teeth, blushing, pallor, rigidity, rapid breathing, sweating, fidgeting, squeaky voice
- › Behavior: downcast eyes; withdrawing; twirling hair; sucking thumb, fingers, hair, or clothes; hoarding; clinging; biting fingernails; whining; rocking; being noisy or quiet; screaming; masturbating; smirking; giggling; crying (Butchard & Spencler 2011)

When a child's characteristic red flags appear, that is the moment for the teacher to support him in one or more of these ways:

- › Approach and offer to sit with him for a while.
- › Ask open-ended questions (“How was your morning?,” “What did you have for breakfast?”).
- › Encourage him to think about what he's feeling (“Do you need a hug?”).
- › Validate and paraphrase whatever he says and show that she understands both his words and the message behind them (“I know it's hard when your friends start building a tower without you. Would you like me to help you join them?”).
- › Reframe a situation positively if that can be done honestly.
- › Consider trying to match the child's voice pattern, which his anxiety may make unusually fast or slow, loud or soft. By gradually relaxing her own voice, a teacher can lead the child into speaking more normally and feeling more at ease, therefore less likely to ramp up his behavior. (Butchard & Spencler 2011)

Let your teachers know that you're aware of how task intensive mornings are and how difficult and time consuming this process of connecting with the child early on can be, but emphasize how incredibly important it is for the child. (See more about managing mornings on page 60 in Chapter 6.)

Several Effective Strategies

If a child's behavior continues to escalate, the teacher may need a different approach. And if punishment isn't the answer, what is? There are numerous options, but it's important to explore those that are research based and that have been proven effective first. Several possibilities follow in no particular order. Help your teachers to figure out which strategy relates best to the function of the behavior (see Chapter 12), their relationship with the child, and their own comfort level.

Provide Positive Guidance

As we said in Chapter 6, educators tend to tell children what not to do—“No hitting,” “Stop running”—but such a command doesn't give enough guidance. Indeed, it is far more effective to calmly say “Carmen, please keep your hands to yourself” or “Kareem, please walk.” Remind your teachers to speak from a reasonable distance—not to shout across the room—and to use the child's name to be sure they have her attention before they tell her what to do.

Offer a Choice

Offering a child a choice when he's behaving inappropriately is empowering for the child and is also an effective way to derail him from his usual track and switch him to a more rational one. When the teacher asks him to make a decision and choose between two possibilities, he has to think—so instead of allowing his feelings and his amygdala to run the show, his prefrontal cortex goes to work just the way it does when the teacher thinks about an arithmetic problem to stop her own amygdala hijack. (See page 37.)

This idea is far from new, and your teachers may say that they've tried it and it doesn't work. This gives you an opportunity to go into the classroom and see for yourself what the teacher is doing and how she is doing it. To repeat, to attract the child's attention, she should begin by using his name—"Kareem, you have a choice"—and then present the two options, neither of which should be punitive—"You can sit beside me, or next to Luisa." The child gains some time to pull himself together as he thinks over his choices. The teacher's tone of voice and body language are critical here. She should remain calm and relaxed so that the situation doesn't turn into a power struggle.

Because the child's actions will tell the teacher what he has decided to do, she needn't repeat the choices. If he hasn't made a choice after several minutes, she can offer a related choice: "Kareem, you can sit on my right side, or on my left side," using gestures to show what she means. She shouldn't repeat the choices or say, "You did this yesterday. I know you can do it." But she can ask, "Would you like some help making a choice, or do you want me to choose for you?" If he chooses but then changes his mind, that is perfectly all right, and the teacher should accept his decision graciously.

Surprise the Child

Children who have been using their behavior as a successful way to meet their needs also know how their families and teachers will respond to it. Sometimes the best way to stop children's challenging behavior is to react in a manner that surprises them instead of telling them what to do. Such a move, which WEVAS (Working Effectively with Violent and Aggressive States; Butchard & Spencler 2011) calls the "interrupt" and which worked with Kareem in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, also allows the child to save face. When the teacher tells Treyvon to stop climbing on the shelf or reminds him that his feet should stay on the floor, chances are he will climb higher because that is exactly what he expected to hear. But if she asks for his help or takes out a game or an activity that he enjoys such as building with magnetic shapes, he's likely to stop climbing and join her. Then she'll have an opportunity to calmly say that climbing on the shelf is dangerous. She should avoid asking why he's climbing. The context of the incident should be self-explanatory: he likely wants her attention or an object that is out of reach, or he just loves climbing. She will have prevented a win-lose situation, avoided drawing attention to his behavior, and most important of all, kept him from feeling humiliated.