

Finding Ways to Welcome a Child with Challenging Behavior

Regardless of your official title, one of the most important aspects of leadership is the responsibility you hold for the welfare of everyone in the program. Usually this isn't an onerous task, but it can become overwhelming when a child is hurting others or constantly disrupting activities. The educators need to feel supported and understood; the other children need to feel secure; their families need to believe that their children are safe and happy; and the family of a child with challenging behavior needs to believe that no one is judging them and be willing to work with you and the teachers. This situation calls for your very best leadership skills and your total commitment. You now have to become an even better and more intentional leader.

Start with yourself. Do you think a child with challenging behavior should remain in your program? The answer is important, because your attitude affects how your staff think about whether or not the child should stay. If you allow him to stay, you may find yourself standing alone, and you may be second-guessing yourself whenever there's a disturbing incident with the child or a family complains about him. On the other hand, you'll be fulfilling a moral and ethical obligation to help the child, following the underlying principles of NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct, acting as a positive role model for your staff, and showing the teachers you believe in their ability to overcome difficulties and uncover the child's potential.

This is not an easy decision to make, especially without staff or board support. Such a huge commitment will likely change everyone's priorities. Even if your state or school district requires you to keep the child in the program and you feel strongly that you want him to stay because you believe it's the right thing to do, it's important to get your teachers on board. Give them some time to think about what this decision will mean for the child and the family, now and in the future. What messages will it send to the staff? To the families? To the children? Together with your teachers, consider the pros and cons of the situation—with the proviso that you'll develop a long list of pros and won't let the discussion deteriorate into a gripe session. That is, you'll guide the teachers so that they see the benefits of keeping the child at the school or center.

Find out what your teachers need to know in order to believe that they can really help this child and continue to keep everyone safe. What additional information do they need about him? What role do they want you to play? Are you willing and can the center afford to hire additional staff or a specialist? Your leadership skills and your relationship with your teachers and families will be especially important if you live in a state or school district where it is not permissible to suspend or expel a young child from an early childhood program. How will you and your teachers come to terms with this reality? Do you believe that they can learn the skills they need and that you can work together with the family?

You may choose to bring in a teacher assistant, shadow teacher or aide, resource teacher, or speech and language therapist who would work directly with the child or to arrange for a mental health consultant or coach to work with staff. It's wise to consider these options *before* your staff becomes burned out and feels frustrated and helpless—a state of affairs that may prevent them from hearing anything the expert suggests. Instead, ask them and the family how they feel about this idea (and obtain the family's consent), and in the meantime find out what support your state or school district provides and if there are other agencies you can contact. Although the mental

health professionals in this field are well trained and do excellent work, be aware that they may serve a very large territory and carry an enormous caseload, sometimes making their visits farther apart than you'd like. It's wise to prepare in advance for the bureaucratic and monetary hoops such a move may require you to jump through. (See Chapter 9 for more information.)

A LONG LIST OF PROS

If your educators need further convincing beyond the argument that it's the moral and ethical thing to do to keep a particular child in the program, remind them of the differences they can make in this child's life by helping her to

- › Develop stable, supportive relationships with adults who care for and teach her
- › Spend time in the presence of children who act as positive role models and teach her social and emotional skills and how to make friends
- › Practice the skills she needs for learning and later schooling, such as listening and following instructions, managing her feelings and her behavior, and asking for help (Zinsser 2018)
- › Find and utilize her strengths (because every child has them)
- › Avoid having to endure a massive rejection that she doesn't understand and that causes her and her family to think of her as bad or unworthy (Jones & Levin 2016)

- › Get on a path to academic and personal success in the future
- › Obtain access to special services such as mental health consultation, early intervention, or special education, if needed

In short, they will be helping the child enjoy a vital learning experience (Jones & Levin 2016).

Point out that the teachers will experience benefits as well. They will

- › Recognize that they already have the skills—or will acquire new ones—that will help them become better teachers
- › Learn skills that will lower their stress level and enable them to teach with more confidence
- › Have the satisfaction of knowing that they've given the child (and even the family) a better chance at a successful and productive life
- › Help the other children develop the social and emotional skills—and the flexibility—to interact with a variety of peers

Being in the Classroom

If you're committed to going forward with keeping a child in the program, how will you provide your teachers with the support, information, and training they need to work with her effectively?

The only way to really know and understand the child and the issues the teachers are dealing with is to spend time in the classroom yourself. Despite the endless administrative duties facing you, it's imperative to find this time—and to go so often that the educators don't see your presence as a token gesture. They spend every day working with this child who hits classmates or continually disrupts activities, while you can come and go as you please. Although you're no doubt giving the teachers helpful feedback, this situation can breed resentment, and you may unintentionally be alienating the very people you're trying to support.

The solution is to become an integral part of the classroom, entering every classroom every day so that both children and teachers feel at ease having you around and don't alter their behavior in your presence. If you appear only after challenging behavior arises, you'll miss vital clues about its origin. Of course, you should also make sure to be there during the times your teachers have identified as difficult, such as transitions, story time, or nap time.

Create both special and routine opportunities to be with each group. Assign yourself a specific task or ask your teachers what you can do to be useful and part of the scenery, such as working with a group of children, organizing shelves, joining in at story or circle, making snack, or helping out during transitions. Spend enough time at it so that you become invisible.

Because you're already overburdened with tasks, it makes sense to schedule this time on your calendar so that it becomes part of your day rather than an added responsibility. To avoid conflicts, arrange your other responsibilities around it. If possible, try to sub whenever a teacher is absent.

Another thing you can do is provide formative and informal feedback to teachers after your classroom visits. When you do this regularly, it is less threatening and easier for them to accept. You don't need to find something to say after each visit, but if you see something that deserves suggestions or positive feedback, such as how a teacher responded when one child kicked another, be sure to find a few minutes out of the children's hearing—in the hall, during nap time, or later in the day—to discuss the incident, especially if the teacher handled it well. The harder the teachers are struggling to respond effectively to problem behavior, the more important it is for you to make these classroom sojourns (Carter 2016; Sykes 2016).

When Differences Arise

To prevent or respond to a child's challenging behavior, you and your staff should develop a common approach that they help to shape and can support. Even if you've worked together smoothly for years, a child with challenging behavior can shake up everyone and everything. Working with children with challenging behavior pushes educators' buttons, and this is when differences surface—differences in culture, race, class, religious beliefs, and political views; in the ways people were raised and educated; in experience, temperament, and support; and, of course, in values and education philosophy.

TIME WELL SPENT

In "The Why and When of Walkthroughs," third grade teacher Paul Murphy (Murphy & George 2018) tells his principal that she doesn't visit their classrooms frequently enough. This means she has no context for understanding what's happening there, which in turn leads her to make wrong assumptions. He begs her to ask him why she's seeing what she's seeing in his classroom:

"You don't know what happened five minutes, five hours, five days, five weeks, or five months before you walked in.

"So ask me why. Ask me why because you don't know. . . . Because if you don't ask, many of your teachers won't tell you. They don't want to rock the boat. They don't want to come off as whiners. . . .

"By making a habit of asking why and truly listening, you honor the individuality of our students and complexity of our craft as teachers." (2-3)

Are you spending enough time in the classroom to see what's really going on there? Would your teachers feel comfortable talking to you in such a candid way? What do you think they would say? If you suspect they'd be reluctant to speak up, what can you do to change things?