

Guiding Children's Behavior

Self-regulation involves being able to control impulses by not acting (behavioral self-regulation), planning and problem solving (cognitive self-regulation), and managing feelings (emotional self-regulation) (Pakulak et al., 2017; Riley et al., 2008). The ability to understand one's own feelings and the feelings of others, to regulate and express emotions appropriately, to control impulses, tolerate frustration, follow limits and expectations, and delay gratification are all critical to a child's success in school and in life (Bettencourt, Gross, & Ho, 2016; Bronson, 2000; Denham, Bassett, Thayer, Mincic, Sirotkin, & Zinsser, 2012). Children learn how to manage their emotions, control their behavior, and plan ahead when teachers create a predictable environment and schedule and when teachers are consistent, trustworthy, and responsive to each child's strengths interests, and needs.

Using Positive Guidance Strategies

Supporting, rather than directing, gives children the strongest chance of recognizing and understanding their emotions. With positive guidance, teachers are able to gently guide children's behavior in respectful and caring ways and help them feel good about themselves. Effective positive guidance helps children learn to recognize and feel empowered to manage their emotions and their behavior. These strategies involve learning to speak with children in particular ways as well as modeling the skills you want them to learn. You scaffold their learning by using particular language and other strategies, such as the following:

Reflective statements show children that you are paying attention to what they are doing. Letting children know that you notice them can sometimes be enough to stop challenging behavior and encourage positive behavior. For example, when you notice that a child has built a block structure, you might say, "Carlos, I see that you used all of the square blocks. You stacked them very high."

"I" statements explain what is happening, your feelings, and the reason for your feelings. They teach children that their actions affect others, and they support children's increasing empathy. As you label your own feelings, you also help children learn names for emotions: "I feel worried when you climb on the shelf. You could fall and get hurt."

"When..., then..." statements explain the expected sequence of behaviors. They let children know the appropriate next step and help children learn to plan: "When you put on your jacket, then you may go outside," and "When you spill milk, then you get the supplies you need to clean it up."

Modeling specific language helps children understand what behavior is appropriate. Rather than saying, "Good job," explain exactly what the child is doing and why it is appropriate: "You are sharing the crayons with Jonetta. That makes her happy because she wants to draw, too."

Modeling specific language also helps children learn how to handle conflicts verbally. Rather than saying, "Use your words," when a problem arises, model the particular language they might need in the given situation. For example, when a child tries to grab a truck from a child who is holding two trucks, you might coach, "Say, 'I would like a truck, too, please.' Now, you say it."

Offering choices supports children's independence and ability to make decisions. Limit choices to two and make sure that both choices are acceptable to you and the child (for example, staying alone on the playground is not a realistic choice). Instead, offer "You may walk to the door by yourself, or you may choose a classmate to go with you."

Redirection provides a child with an acceptable alternative to unacceptable behavior. For example, if a child is throwing rocks on the playground, you might redirect her to throw balls instead. You would prompt, "I see that you are practicing your throwing skills. It's not safe to throw rocks because someone might get hurt. Here's a bag with balls of different sizes. You may choose which balls to throw."

Changing the environment can involve moving the child to a new location, adding or removing materials, or changing the time of day when something occurs. For example, after noticing that several children are climbing on furniture during choice time, you would talk with the children and designate a special time for small groups to practice climbing safely on the outdoor equipment.

Showing while telling involves talking to children about what they should do as you use gestures and other visual clues to show them. Focus on the positive—the "do" rather than the "don't"—and demonstrate the behavior you expect. For example, you would touch the jackets as you explain, "We need to put our jackets on before we go outside." You can also use this strategy to draw children's attention to other people's feelings. You would point to and look at Derek's face as you explain, "Look at Derek's face. His frown tells you that he doesn't like it when you poke him."

Responding to Challenging Behavior

In this section, you will not find a complete list of challenging behaviors. This is because every teacher has a different threshold for what behaviors he or she may find challenging. It is also essential to recognize the difference between challenging behavior and behavior that is simply developmentally appropriate for a particular child. Take a look at the progressions for development and learning to understand whether your expectations for children's behavior are realistic, or whether behavior that may strike you as challenging might be a result of a child's frustration with something in particular.

It is also important to consider that the steps you take to organize the physical space, establish a clear structure for the day (as discussed in chapter 2), create a classroom community, and guide children's behavior will help most children develop self-regulation skills and function productively in the classroom. For children whose behaviors you do find challenging, the way you respond to these children sends a powerful message to everyone in the class.

Imagine how children feel when, day after day, they hear their teachers say:

- "Haven't I told you a hundred times not to do that?"
- "I don't care what happened. I'm angry with both of you."
- "Don't you know better than that? You should know the rules by now!"
- "Instead of going outside, you need to sit in the time-out chair and think about what you just did!"
- "You know we have a rule about sharing. I'm going to put this toy away, and no one will get to play with it. I hope you're both satisfied!"

Statements like these are upsetting to all children and do little to help children change their behavior. Most likely, they reflect a teacher's frustration at being unable to establish control in the classroom. The better alternative is to have a repertoire of strategies for dealing with behaviors that you find challenging and establishing control in the classroom.

Common Challenging Behaviors

Testing limits, physical aggression, biting, temper tantrums, and bullying are among the most common challenging behaviors. Many caring teachers struggle with these behaviors every day. Unfortunately, our society glorifies aggression in many ways. Consider the television programs children watch and the toys marketed to children. Sadly, too many children experience violence or neglect, and their behavior shows the profound impact of these experiences. It is also important to note the importance of the teacher–child bond during potentially challenging situations and behaviors, because “when you and a child care about each other, he has a desire to learn and a model to emulate, and you have more understanding, patience, and persistence” (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2016).

Here are suggestions for responding firmly and positively to children whose behavior you might find challenging.

Testing limits is one of the ways preschool children discover how much power they have and the kind of authority with which they are dealing. Some children test limits repeatedly, and they need adults who understand children's need to do so. Here is a helpful framework recommended by Dr. Becky Bailey in her book, *There's Got to Be a Better Way* (2003, pp. 202–212).

- **Acknowledge the child's feelings and wishes.** A child who feels acknowledged and understood is more open to hearing what you have to say. The first step is to figure out what the child is trying to accomplish, wants, or needs, and verbalize what you think the child's intentions or feelings are, e.g., “You feel like climbing today,” or “Those small beads are frustrating for you.”
- **State the limit clearly.** In simple terms, convey what behavior is not permitted. Be very specific and direct: “We use tables for our work and for eating. Tables are not for climbing,” and “You may string the beads. They are not throwing toys.”
- **Say what behavior is acceptable.** Give the child other ways to address a need or wish: “You may climb up to the loft or stand on the hollow blocks. Which one would you like to do?” or “Let's pick up these beads first. If you want to throw something, you may throw beanbags. If you want to use beads, I will find some large ones that won't be so frustrating. What's your choice?” When children may choose between ways to address their needs, they are more willing to comply.
- **Offer a final choice.** If a child is determined to test the limits, does not stop an unsafe behavior, and does not choose one of the acceptable options you have offered, that child needs your additional patience. Keep your message consistent and firm. The child must understand that the behavior must stop: “If you continue to climb on the table, you will have to leave this area and play in one without tables. It's your choice.” If the child continues, lead him gently away, saying, “You are still climbing, so you will have to go to another area. I'll help you find a place to play safely. When we go outside, you will have a chance to do some real climbing.”

The most important message to communicate is that the classroom is a safe place.

Immediately stop any behavior that might injure someone. Keep in mind that challenging behavior of any kind is an opportunity to identify limits and clarify which behaviors are acceptable and which are not.

Physical aggression (hitting, scratching, kicking, and other behavior that hurts people) must be stopped immediately. Both the aggressor and the victim need immediate attention. Intervene by positioning yourself at the aggressive child's level. Clearly state the rule forbidding physical aggression: "Alexa, stop now! You may not hurt people." Involve the aggressive child in comforting the one who was hurt (if the hurt child permits this). This technique helps the aggressor understand the connection between her actions and the victim's pain: "Please get the ice pack from the freezer right away so Sonya can put it on her leg."

When a child is physically aggressive and loses control, you may need to hold her until she calms down. Ask a colleague to respond to the hurt child. Children feel scared when they lose control, and your firm arms can help that child feel safe because you have taken charge of the situation. Providing a comforting verbal reminder (e.g., "I'm holding you to help you stay safe") also helps the child know she is safe. After a few minutes, you can discuss what happened: "Do you want to talk about what made you feel so angry? I could see that you were upset." Reassure the child that you want to listen to her feelings. Let the child recover before discussing alternative ways to handle anger and frustration.

Biting, like other forms of aggression, requires an immediate response. Clearly state the rule about not biting. Involve the child who did the biting in comforting the one who was bitten and talk about what caused the problem.

Refrain from saying to the biter something like, "How would you like it if Mark bit you?" That strategy only reinforces aggression. Instead, think of a way to redirect the child's energy and attention positively.

If a child bites often, talk with family members to find out whether the child bites at home. Purposefully observe the child to see whether you can pinpoint when the behavior occurs and what might be the root of the problem. Develop a plan to stop it, for example, by intervening before the child reaches the frustration level. Observe, anticipate, and redirect biters before they reach their target!

Temper tantrums are a child's way of expressing frustration by screaming, kicking, and crying. Tantrums often occur when children have very strong feelings that they cannot express through words. When a child is having a temper tantrum, you have to act quickly to protect the child as well as other people and things. Some children calm down when you hold their arms and legs firmly and comfort them as you explain that you are helping them stay safe. Others need you to be nearby and to hear your calm voice. Once a child relaxes, you can talk about what happened and what the child can do differently in the future:

"I could tell you were really mad. Your arms were going like this, and your face looked like this (demonstrate). Your whole body was telling me that you were angry. You really wanted to play with the truck. Next time, try telling Juwan, 'Let me play with the truck when you are finished.'"

Many tantrums can be avoided by offering a developmentally appropriate and engaging program. Children who are tired or frustrated are more likely to have tantrums than those who are well-rested, who are fed nutritious meals and snacks before they get too hungry, and who are provided with age-appropriate materials and activities. Observe children to determine signs of frustration and understand when and why they lose control. When a sign appears, direct the child to a soothing activity such as water play, sand play, or listening to music.

Bullying is when a “stronger or more competent peer initiates verbally or physically aggressive behavior toward another” (Pepler & Bierman, 2018). Bullying is not rough play, or an instance of aggressive behavior or of social exclusion. It is “a series of acts intended to hurt another child, committed by a child to gain or to assert power over another child” (Snow, 2014) Often the biggest bullies are the most fearful children. Their behavior has to be stopped and redirected. The longer children are allowed to bully others, the harder it is to change this behavior.

Bullies often pick on particular children. Children who are victimized time after time as targets of aggressive and frequent bullying have “poor social, health, and economic outcomes” (Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014).

The most important thing you can do as a teacher is to ensure a positive, caring classroom community. Research notes the “pressing need for prevention and early intervention programs.” Supporting all children’s social and emotional development in the context of a positive and supportive learning environment is a powerful approach against “negative peer processes, particularly rejection, exclusion, and bullying.” It also ensures “positive peer cultures that support healthy social–emotional development” (Pepler & Bierman, 2018). You can stop the bullying and teach victims to be assertive when an incident occurs or at a more neutral time such as during a group meeting. For example, you might read a story about teasing and have children practice ways to respond. Involve children in practicing what to say if someone does something mean to them: “Stop pushing!” or “I’m still playing with it,” or “Stop calling me that name.”

Here is an example of how one teacher handles challenging behavior.

Derek grabs the truck that Jonetta is playing with and wheels it away. Mr. Alvarez notices that Jonetta just sits still as tears well from her eyes. Jonetta does not usually defend herself, so Mr. Alvarez steers Derek back to where Jonetta is sitting and says, “Hold on a minute. What happened here? Jonetta, you were playing with the truck. Tell Derek, ‘No. I’m using the truck. You may not have it now.’” Then, he continues to coach Jonetta, “You try it now.” When she does not respond, Mr. Alvarez says, “Let’s say it together first.”

References for “Guiding Children’s Behavior” Excerpt

- Bettencourt, A., Gross, D., & Ho, G. (2016). *The costly consequences of not being socially and behaviorally ready by kindergarten: Associations with grade retention, receipt of academic support services, and suspensions/expulsions*. Baltimore Education Research Consortium.
- Bronson, M. B. (2000). *Self-regulation in early childhood*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Denham, S. A., Bassett, H. H., Thayer, S. K., Mincic, M. S., Sirotkin, Y. S., & Zinsser, K. (2012). Observing preschoolers’ social–emotional behavior: Structure, foundations, and prediction of early school success. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 173*(3), 246–278.
- Kaiser, B., & Sklar Rasminsky, J. (2016). *Challenging behavior in young children: Understanding, preventing, and responding effectively* (4th edition). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pakulak, E., Gomsrud, M., Reynolds, M. M., Bell, T. A., Giuliano, R. J., Karns, C. M., Klein, S., Longoria, Z. N., Vega O’Neil, L., Santillán, J., & Neville, H. (2017). Focusing on families: A two-generation model for reducing parents’ stress and boosting preschoolers’ self-regulation and attention. *Young Children, 72*(2).
- Pepler, D., & Bierman, K. (2018). *With a little help from my friends – The importance of peer relationships for social–emotional development*. (Report). State College, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.
- Riley, D., San Juan, R. R., Klinker, J., & Ramminger, A. (2008). *Social & emotional development: Connecting science and practice in early childhood settings*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press and Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Snow, K. (2014). *Bullying in early childhood*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Takizawa, R., Maughan, B., & Arseneault, L. (2014). Adult health outcomes of childhood bullying victimization: Evidence from a five-decade longitudinal British birth cohort. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 171*(7), 777–784.