

Tip Sheets

Challenging Behavior and the Role Adults Play

Children use behavior to communicate. Young children may use challenging behavior to ask the adults around them for help expressing strong emotions and learning to get along with others.

Whether a child is physical toward others, demands an inordinate amount of attention, has emotional outbursts, or refuses to do what is asked, it is our job as caregivers to intentionally respond to these behaviors. In doing so, we take on many roles to support the growth and development of a child.

1. Detective: Explore the Meaning of Behavior

As detective, we gather information about a child's behavior, analyze it, draw conclusions, and develop a plan for success. Look for "clues" while watching a child play with others, cope with challenges, and deal with emotions. Observations can tell us about:

- Current level of development.
- Areas in which growth is needed.
- Strengths and unique style of learning.

Observations also help us identify and anticipate:

- Activities/times of day that might upset a child.
- Signs a child is upset.
- Situations that may frustrate a child.

Once we learn about a child's abilities, we can nourish their growth by matching learning opportunities to their needs.

You may also want to gather information from any specialists involved in a child's care so you are aware of any special needs and can become a partner in designing and implementing a plan for care and education.

2. Nurturer: Build a Caring Relationship

Children thrive when they are in trusting, loving, respectful relationships. Positive relationships help children feel safe and valued, build self-esteem, and provide a basis for guiding a child's behavior. Nurture each child by accepting each one for who they are. Many children can withstand challenges if they have a caring relationship with an adult who believes in their ability to prevail.

Tips for Building Positive Relationships

- Develop a cooperative relationship with the child's family by learning about their culture and parenting style. This info can lead to a greater understanding and consistency between the home and care settings.
- Allow adequate time for less-structured activities. Child-initiated activities validate a child's play and helps them feel valued.
- Encourage a child to develop trust by being trustworthy yourself. Responding to a child's physical and emotional needs is essential.

Once a relationship is established, it cannot be ignored. For a relationship to flourish, it must be maintained with time and attention.

3. Guide and Role Model: Provide Appropriate Tools and Set Positive Examples

As a guide, we lead the way for a child to develop appropriate behavior and social skills as they learn to interact with others. We offer choices that help steer the child toward appropriate activities. When conflicts occur, we teach ways to resolve the issue and discuss ways that a similar upset might be

avoided in the future. We serve as a role model when we demonstrate to children ways of:

- Appropriately expressing feelings.
- Coping with feelings and frustration.
- Getting along with others.
- Problem-solving.

Observing others is one of the most significant ways in which children learn—and the model that adults offer is powerful. Particularly important is demonstrating how to treat others. We must model listening, acceptance of differences, consideration for another person’s feelings, and ways to offer help, whether with adults or children.

Teaching Appropriate Expression of Emotions

Educators help children learn to recognize their feelings, meet their needs, and express in themselves in appropriate ways, such as:

- Going to an adult for help when feeling mad.
- Painting or color to express anger.
- Redirecting energy to a sensory activity such as playdough or water play.

Some children might lack the vocabulary or ability to communicate their feelings. Children in general will need repeated practice of words and methods for appropriate expressions of their emotions. We can teach children:

- The names for feelings to help them feel understood and offer a sense of relief. Mad, sad, happy, and scared are among the basics.
- To recognize the different intensities of their emotions. Feelings of anger can range from upset or frustrated to really, really angry.
- To recognize the physical signs that indicate their emotions are escalating, such as a tummy ache or clenched fists.
- That all feelings are respected/accepted, but certain expressions of those feelings are not.

- That they should accept their feelings, but are not allowed to hurt others or themselves.

When a child is unable to perform problem-solving tasks independently, we can walk them through the steps. A child who has more skills might only need us to offer support by standing nearby and acting as a resource if necessary.

Basic Steps in Problem Solving

1. Identify the problem.
2. Calm down (take deep breaths, count to five, take a break from the activity, etc.).
3. Think of solutions.
4. Try the best one.

Words to Guide the Process

- “Tell me about your argument.”
- “Take a deep breath and calm down.”
- “What could you do to work it out?”
- “Which idea do you want to try?”

Children come to realize that everyone experiences feelings, although the intensity with which they are expressed or the way they are expressed can differ.

Keep in mind that the skills required to interact with others, problem-solve, and express emotions in an appropriate way are complex and take many years for even adults to achieve.

Additional Resources

Parent Child Help | Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, Ed.D.
www.parentchildhelp.com

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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