



Tips for Responding to Challenging Behavior in Young Children

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The most effective strategies for addressing challenging behavior are primarily focused on prevention of challenging behavior and promotion of appropriate social behaviors. These strategies include environmental manipulations, providing positive attention and feedback to children, and teaching social skills and emotional competencies. Even when these practices are in place, some young children will engage in challenging behavior. There are several strategies you can use when responding to challenging behavior but these should always be combined with more intentional promotion and prevention practices. The use of these response strategies is intended to reduce the likelihood of challenging behavior, but will not be effective without careful and intentional attention to teaching social skills and emotional competencies.

1. When children are engaging in challenging behavior, keep interactions with them to a minimum during these episodes. You should ensure the child's safety while providing minimal attention to the challenging behavior. This recommendation is based upon the fact that the two most likely reasons for challenging behavior are: (1) attempts to get attention or (2) attempts to avoid or escape a non-preferred activity. Sometimes if we attend to children during this time, we are reinforcing their inappropriate behavior.
2. When children are engaging in challenging behavior, interrupt, and redirect the child to the appropriate alternative behavior using minimal attention, discussion, and emotion. Your redirect should focus on stating what the child should or might do. For example, if the child has taken another's toy, prompt a more appropriate social skill (e.g., "You can trade with Eric."). For example, throwing blocks might be redirected to: "Let's build, you put one here!" Notice that this recommendation involves minimal interaction and usually just one prompt.
3. Reinforce the nearest child who is engaging in the appropriate, alternative behavior (e.g., "I see Manuel using walking feet" or "LaShawn you are sharing the blocks so nicely with your friends!"). Then, when the child with challenging behavior engages in the desired behavior, immediately use descriptive feedback to acknowledge his/her use of the desired behavior.
4. When the incident of challenging behavior ends and the child engages in appropriate behavior, provide positive attention to the child. This might include joining in the child's play, having a conversation with the child about the child's interests or activity, providing the child with a response opportunity, or providing the child with physical affection. It is important for the child to be able to rejoin the classroom community and to experience positive attention from the adult in the classroom when behaving appropriately.

5. If another child is hurt, attend to the “victim.” You can say, for example, “Tim, it looks like you got hurt, come sit here with me.” Notice that this recommendation involves ignoring, for the moment, the challenging behavior.
6. Put 95% of your time and attention into the teaching of replacement behaviors and do this when the child is not engaging in the challenging behavior. If and when children are upset and engaging in challenging behavior, it is likely that your teaching efforts will be minimally effective. Intentionally plan opportunities to teach the replacement skill throughout the day before the challenging behavior is likely to occur and focus most of your efforts on this instruction.
7. Remember that what keeps challenging behavior occurring are the things that happen after the behavior occurs (e.g., a redirection, saying, “stop,” being escorted to the cozy corner during large group). If challenging behavior seem to be reoccurring, consider what has been happening immediately following the challenging behavior and adapt it.
8. Find individualized reinforcers and use them liberally at first. Challenging behavior works for the child 100% of the time *unless* we teach the more appropriate skill and reinforce it at a higher frequency than the challenging behavior is being reinforced.
9. Figure out what makes the good times so good. If you analyze carefully, most children who engage in challenging behavior actually spend very little time engaged. Think about what environmental and contextual characteristics are engaging to the child and add more of these to the times of the day and routines when challenging behavior is most likely to occur.
10. Make a plan, write it down, and teach *all* adults what to do! It is important that all adults are responding consistently to children’s appropriate and challenging behavior.
11. Know that severe and persistent challenging behavior can require the use of individualized positive behavior support (e.g., Dunlap, Strain, Lee, Joseph, Vatland, & Fox, 2017; Dunlap, Wilson, Strain, & Lee, 2013). That is, once challenging behavior is severe and persistent, it oftentimes necessitates the use of a process in which goals are set, data collection occurs, the function of the behavior is determined, and a comprehensive behavior support plan is developed based on the function of the challenging behaviors, implemented consistently, and monitored to ensure success.

References

- Dunlap, G., Strain, P.S., Lee, J.K., Joseph, J. D., Vatland, C., & Fox, L. (2017). *Prevent, teach, reinforce for families: A model of individualized positive behavior support for home and community*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
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