

Challenging Behavior: Working with Children, Communicating with Parents



When working in early childhood education, it is inevitable that you will encounter children with challenging behaviors. When dealing with children expressing this type of behavior, it is important for early childhood professionals to feel supported and equipped with knowledge and resources on how to deal with these behaviors.

There are many reasons why a child may be displaying challenging behavior. Changes in the child's home life or routine, dietary issues, sleep patterns, and inability to express certain feelings or emotions are just a few reasons you may see changes in a child's behavior. Young children may not be able to express that they are having a hard time with something but they will give us clues through their behavior. When a child is displaying difficult behavior, spend some time observing that child. Is this behavior new? Are there patterns or triggers with this behavior? It is important to document any changes that occur. Taking accurate, objective observations can help the teacher/provider better understand what may be going on with the child. Observations can also help the teacher/provider to decide if any changes should be made to help support the child. Spend some time reflecting on these observations. Look at your typical daily schedule. Are there any changes that could be made to your day that may help this child? Could you add some additional one on one time with the child? Sometimes a small change could make a big difference.

Resources

The good news is that there are plenty of resources to help with challenging behaviors. Many resources are free and easy to access.

- **The Center on Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)** – This website provides training modules, social stories, book lists, tools for building relationships, and tools for developing behavior support plans. Some of these resources, such as the social stories, can be used with the whole class to encourage positive interactions.
- **Zero to Three-** This website provides lots of great developmental information for our youngest children. There is also information that can be passed along to parents.
- **The Center for Resilient Children-** This website has information for all ages, but their Flip It technique is designed for use with preschool children. They offer a free PowerPoint on this technique. There are also many professional development opportunities.



Did you know that DIEEC offers training, both online and in person, to help early childhood handle challenging behaviors?





Professional Development

DIEEC offers training, both online and in person, to help early childhood professionals handle challenging behaviors. If you are on the DIEECPD.org click on the training calendar and look under “Social Emotional”. Don’t forget to check out the online training link as well! Some examples of these trainings are listed below.

- **Positive Behavior: Building on Children’s Strengths (in-person)**
- **Positive Behavior Management (online)**
- **School Age Social Emotional Wellness Bundle (online)**

Tips for Talking with Parents

Let’s be honest, talking with parents about their child’s behavior is not the easiest thing to do. It can be a difficult conversation for both the teacher/provider and the parent. It helps for the teacher/provider to have an established relationship with the parent. This ensures that the two individuals can work together to support the child. Here are some ways to keep the conversation moving in a positive direction.

- **Language-** Pay attention to the language you are using. Refrain from describing the child or their behavior as “bad”. Consider describing the behavior as “challenging”. Your initial word choices will set the tone for the rest of the conversation.
- **Documentation-** Be sure to have specific examples for the parent. Refrain from general statements such as, “He wasn’t listening today”. The parent needs to know as much information as possible to be able to help by talking with the child at home. Consider tracking the behavior by writing observations and being specific. An example would be, “This morning while playing in the block area, I noticed James became frustrated after his block structure fell a few times and he started throwing blocks.” Be sure to add information about how the situation was handled in the classroom.
- **Set aside time to talk-** Refrain from addressing the challenging behavior during chaotic times such as drop off and pick up. Whenever possible set aside time when the teacher/provider and parent can sit and talk without being distracted. If a parent cannot meet in person, suggest a phone conference.
- **Point out the positives-** No parent wants to feel like their child is singled out as the “bad kid”. While tracking the challenging behavior, try to write down a few examples of positive behavior even if it is something small. When you meet with the parent, you can share the positive moments from the child’s day as well.



Tips for Teachers/Providers/Administrators

- **Take a minute-** If you feel yourself getting frustrated, take a break. Even if you just walk to the other side of the space and take a few deep breaths. It's surprising what stepping away for a few seconds can do. If you are in a center with extra staff, see if someone could cover for a minute. A few deep breaths might seem silly but it can be just the break a teacher/provider needs to continue dealing with the behavior in a positive, loving manner.
- **Focus on the positive-** Try to find moments throughout the day when the child is behaving. Remember that for this child, something as small as pushing in their chair may be what you need to focus on. Praise them for even the smallest positive behavior! Let them know that you are watching for their good behavior. Sometimes these children can feel like teachers and parents are waiting for them to make a mistake. Many of these children need extra love and support, so praise them every chance you get!
- **Reflection-** At the end of the day, spend some time reflecting on how you have handled these challenges. Focus on the positives and know that you are doing your best to support that child!
- **Administrators-** Be sure to provide support to your staff. Let them know that you are in their corner and that there are resources and supports to help them handle these behaviors. If you notice a teacher handling a particularly difficult situation, acknowledge the positives!

There are some instances when challenging behavior ventures outside the realm of what is considered "typical." When this happens, outside, professional help may be needed. Some examples of behavior that may be concerning are aggressive or violent behavior, disruption of the care of other children, or a child causing harm to themselves. In these cases it can be helpful to reach out to professionals such as Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) or Child Development Watch/Child Find (with parents' permission).

Dealing with challenging behaviors is one of the most difficult parts of being an early childhood professional. It is important for teachers and providers to have the tools necessary to deal with these situations in a positive manner. Delaware Stars appreciates all that you do for the children in your care, especially on the most difficult of days!