

SUPPORTING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

This [webinar](#) presents strategies for supporting young children exhibiting challenging behaviors. Dr. Tweety Yates (former Co-Project Coordinator for the Center on Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning and, currently, an early childhood consultant and Research Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), who serves on the leadership team for the Pyramid Model Consortium, discusses national trends and provides concrete examples of how early childhood educators can proactively address these behaviors.

DEFINING “CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR”

The Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (2011) defines challenging behavior as “any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults.” However, definitions vary across people and situations.

For many early childhood educators, children’s challenging behavior is a stressor. For others, it is a challenge to better serve children. Educators’ feelings about and reactions to challenging behavior are influenced by their values, beliefs, knowledge of childhood development, and sense of competence.

“CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR” TRENDS

Teachers and administrators are reporting an increase in children’s challenging behaviors, which have been linked to higher rates of preschool expulsion and suspension.

In a recent focus group, teachers attributed the increase in these behaviors to large class sizes, high child-to-teacher ratios, longer preschool days for both children and teachers, insufficient play time, poverty, homelessness, and family substance abuse. They also noted that adults may have different expectations for physically larger children, whom they often perceive to be older.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Early childhood educators have a responsibility to prepare young children for their next educational setting. Yet, an estimated 10-30 percent of preschool children are not behaviorally and emotionally ready to succeed in kindergarten.

Moreover, early problem behavior is predictive of several negative outcomes, including poor academic performance, rejection from peers and adults, delinquency in adolescence, gang membership, and even incarceration.

“If you have a preschool program, and you expel the children who need it most, you’re sabotaging your rate of return. No child is more in need of a school-readiness-boosting preschool experience than a child who is being expelled or suspended from preschool.”

—Walter Gilliam

HOW TO ADDRESS CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

There are a number of ways early childhood educators can address children’s challenging behaviors. These include the following:

- Think about what you can change (e.g., interactions, the environment) to help curb children’s challenging behaviors. This may be easier than trying to change the child.

- Suspension and expulsion rates decline when teachers feel confident and competent. Thus, if you are a program manager, you should work on providing high-quality training and professional development to staff. If you are a teacher, take advantage of all professional development opportunities offered.
- When there is challenging behavior you can't handle, you should have a team of people (including the child's family) debrief the behavior, brainstorm a plan, and commit to it.
- Go beyond identifying the trigger(s), behavior, and maintaining consequences that make the behavior continue. Identify the *purpose* of the behavior, remembering that children often use challenging behavior to communicate messages that they are unable to articulate using language.
- Use specific supportive practices, such as the following:
 - » Help them be aware of their space by putting tape on the floor;
 - » Put a footstool under a child's chair to help prevent him or her from slipping off;
 - » Teach children social emotional skills;
 - » Have a clear plan/schedule for the day, so children know what to expect;
 - » Create a space where children can take a break from the action and take deep breaths to relax; and
 - » Teach children *what* to do and *how* to do it (e.g., have conversations about what it means to be a good friend).

Many early childhood educators have adopted the [Pyramid Model](#), a conceptual framework of evidence-based practices developed by two national, federally-funded research and training centers: The Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) and the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI).

The Pyramid Model emphasizes the importance of having teaching staff who build strong relationships with children, and teaching children how to handle challenging situations. The model also stresses the need to build an effective workforce—one that encourages nurturing and responsive relationships with children, maintains a high-quality supportive environment, offers targeted social-emotional supports to children, and utilizes intensive interventions in the small percentage of instances when such support is needed.

Early childhood educators who are already using the Pyramid Model should reflect upon which of their practices are working well and which practices could be improved.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- [The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(CSEFEL\)](#): This site offers practical strategies, training materials, What Works briefs, and state-specific information and resources.
- [The Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children \(TACSEI\)](#): This site offers tools responding to young children exhibiting challenging behavior. Specific resources include a backpack series and several “make and take” workshops.
- [Head Start Center for Inclusion](#): Based out of the University of Washington and funded by the Office of Head Start, this site offers resources for a variety of stakeholders, including teachers/classroom staff, disabilities coordinators, supervisors/coaches, trainers, family service providers, and families.
- [The Pyramid Plus Framework: The Inclusion Model](#): Situated within the Colorado Center for Social Emotional Competence and Inclusion, Pyramid Plus bases its inclusion work on the SpecialQuest Birth-Five approach and other evidence-based inclusion programs.

To attend future webinars and access various resources, become a member of the [Supporting Children with High Needs Community of Practice](#). Explore additional PDG TA Communities of Practice by visiting pdgta.org.