

The Daily Parent

A NEWSLETTER FOR WORKING PARENTS

CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

How You and Your Child Care Provider Can Help Your Child

Typical Versus Challenging Behavior

At some point, all parents deal with the frustration of having their toddler spread eagle, crying or kicking, in the middle of a store aisle, or having their 6-year-old disobey and challenge rules or limits. Although these behaviors are often hard for parents to deal with, they are very normal for children in these age groups. With time and positive guidance from adults, these "trying" behaviors usually go away.

The term "challenging behavior" is often used to describe children's trying or "problem" behaviors that do not go away over time or after using typical tried-and-true discipline methods.

What to Do?

It is important for you and your child care provider to have a variety of strategies to use when raising and caring for your child. Every strategy may not work for every child. Also, as your child gets older and changes, you may

Age/Stage	Typical Behaviors
Toddlers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Tantrums ▶ Terrible Twos - "No!" being the most used word ▶ Emerging independence ▶ Bites or hits
Preschoolers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Tests limits ▶ Asks "Why?" a lot ▶ May tell lies, steal or argue
Young School-Age Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Stubborn, refuses to do something ▶ Bossy, likes to be in control ▶ Does not like criticism ▶ Still emerging independence - wants things own way

need to change strategies and approaches.

The approaches below are helpful for all children both at home and in child care. They are particularly useful in preventing or reducing trying behaviors.

1. **Make sure your child or others are not in danger.** If your child is behaving in a way that may injure him or others, remove him from the situation or take steps to stop him. For young children, just pick them up and physically move them.
2. **Change the setting or location.** If your child's behavior occurs only in certain situations, specific places, or only around certain people,

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Children with Challenging Behavior

you may be able to stop the behavior by observing what is happening in these instances. You may stop the behavior just by removing your child from that setting or from being around those people.

- 3. Create a distraction.** A young child can often be distracted into stopping an undesirable behavior. For example, if your preschooler has trouble sharing toys and gets into squabbles with other children over a toy, distract him or her with another toy. Present the toy in a way that makes it seem extra special.
- 4. Tell your child in advance what is happening.** Most children like routines and predictability. Changes in their normal day's routine could upset them and trigger negative behaviors. When possible, let your child know what will happen ahead of time. Prepare them for any changes to their daily routine. "Today, after your nap, your grandmother will pick you up instead of me."
- 5. Respond calmly, speak briefly.** It is hard to listen to your child when she is upset, talking in a loud voice, or is talking so much that you cannot really hear what she is trying to say. Do not try to talk about why something is right or wrong while your child or you are upset. Wait until a "teachable" moment when both of you are away from the moment and calm.
- 6. Teach alternative behaviors.** Teach your child what you want them to DO instead of what not to do. For example, say: "Tell me calmly what is wrong," instead of "Stop screaming!"
- 7. Offer choices.** Give your child choices to help build independence while also giving him some control over his environment. For example "Do you want to put your shoes on before we get in the car or after you are in your seat?"
- 8. Notice the positive—catch your child doing "good."** Adults tend to not focus when children are showing positive behaviors. If you reinforce positive behaviors, they will continue. Praise your child when positive behavior occurs. For example, "You did a nice job of waiting for your turn. You know how to wait calmly!"
- 9. Be consistent.** Children like things to be consistent and predictable. Establish regular

routines for your child and stick with them (examples: routines for eating, getting dressed, going to child care, and so on). "It's almost 7:30, time to get in the car!"

- 10. Use humor or games.** Angry or upset preschoolers and young school-age children can often be calmed with humor. "How fast can you buckle your seat belt? If you can do it before I get mine on, you'll win the game!"

Why Do We Discipline Children?

To teach children to be responsible (control their behavior and impulses, and to respond appropriately) and to understand that their behavior has consequences. Discipline is not to punish or harm the child, but rather to teach better behavior.

Beyond Typically Trying Behaviors

The term "challenging behavior" is used to describe children's difficult or "problem" behaviors that do not go away over time or after using typical tried-and-true discipline methods. You and your child care provider should focus on the behavior and not the child.

Challenging behaviors can occur at home, in child care, in school, or any combination. They usually occur regularly rather than every once in awhile. Most challenging behaviors fall into one of these categories:

- ▮ **Aggression:** biting, hitting, throwing, choking, verbal threats
- ▮ **Self-injury:** head banging, scratching or picking skin, throwing self to floor
- ▮ **Stereotypical or repeated motions:** gestures, hand flicking, mouthing, body rocking
- ▮ **Classroom disruption:** hyperactivity, talking out, arguing, unusual vocalizations
- ▮ **Noncompliance:** not responding to directions, defiance, bickering, jumping, crawling

- ▶ **Inappropriate play or behavior:** stealing, selfexposure, inappropriate touching of others, eating nonfood materials, other behaviors outside of social acceptance

Many of these behaviors can result in a child hurting someone else or himself, or cause disruption within a larger group setting.

Reasons for Challenging Behaviors

There is always a reason for challenging behavior, but it may not be that easy to figure out. It is rarely the result of bad parenting, and it is never because a child is just “bad” or “wild.” Children’s behavior is often the result of many factors.

Some very young children may bite or hit out of frustration, others become stubborn and do not follow instruction because they’re trying to be independent. However, some challenging behaviors could have a physical cause. For example, if a child has hearing loss or does not understand what is being asked of him, he may “act out” because he is frustrated and upset.

Did You Know That . . .

- ▶ All behavior is a way to communicate?
- ▶ All behavior that persists is usually working for the child?
- ▶ All problem behavior has a cause and a goal?
- ▶ There is a connection between a child’s ability to communicate and challenging behavior?
- ▶ The pattern of behavior is important: not single or isolated events?
- ▶ The best approaches to challenging behavior are ones that
 - » Respond to the underlying cause and need for the behavior?
 - » Use positive approaches?
- ▶ The best way to prevent challenging behavior is to foster children’s social and emotional needs and skills?

What More Can You Do?

For more serious or challenging behaviors that do not respond to regular approaches or strategies, it would be helpful to determine the cause or trigger of the challenging behavior(s). Some challenging behavior may have an underlying physical cause or be the result of an undiagnosed disability.

For persistent and serious challenging behaviors, you need to get support from all adults who care for your child. Teamwork is essential to come up with a positive behavior support plan for any child and family dealing with challenging behaviors.

Steps to Take:

1. Consult your child’s doctor to rule out or diagnose any physical causes.
2. Speak with and get observations and feedback from your child care provider or child’s teacher.
3. Put together written observations of your child’s behavior over a period of time. Make sure your observations list:
 - » When the behavior occurs,
 - » What happens before it occurs,
 - » Who are the people in the environment when it is happening,
 - » What is said to your child, and
 - » How the situation was handled.
4. Use a team approach to address your child’s behavior. The team should include you, other family members or people who interact with your child in a significant way, your child’s provider or teacher, your child’s doctor, and others.

If you are the parent of a child with challenging behaviors, make sure you get the support you need. Challenging behaviors in children are not a new thing. There is a lot of new research, resources and support available to you and your child.

Children with Challenging Behavior



For More Information

- ▶ **Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behaviors**, <http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/>, has strategies for working with children who have ongoing challenging behaviors.
- ▶ **Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning CSEFEL**, <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/>, is focused on promoting

the social emotional development and school readiness of young children birth to age 5.

- ▶ **Family Connections**, <http://www.fci.org/index.asp>, continues the work of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. It creates projects for children, families, and those who support them.
- ▶ **Parent Education**, University of Minnesota Extension Service, <http://www.extension.umn.edu/parentEducation/onlinetools.html>, offers online resources with helpful hints and support to parents.
- ▶ **PBS Parents**, www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids, has a variety of parenting and practical information that parents can download.

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