

Developmentally Appropriate Behavior: A Case Study

How you define developmentally appropriate versus challenging behavior is unique to each individual child. Read the case study about Lena to learn how her family's expectations affect her behavior in a child care program. The *Developmentally Appropriate Behavior: Reflection* activity has follow-up questions for this case study.

Lena is nearly 3 years old and began attending a child care program two months ago. This is her first experience in care outside her family, and Lena has adjusted well to the program. She loves to color, look at books, and ride the tricycles. She frequently snuggles up to Katherine, a toddler caregiver, and requests to read books. Katherine thinks Lena is a very social and typical child except for one concern—Lena is still dependent on staff members to feed her at mealtimes. Lena will occasionally use her hands to eat finger foods, but she mostly expects Katherine to put the food in her mouth and is uninterested in using a spoon and fork. Katherine has modeled how to use utensils for Lena and has also attempted to provide hand-over-hand support, which Lena resists. The staff have occasionally observed Lena independently using utensils, so they know she is capable.

Katherine and Lena's other caregivers have decided they are no longer going to help Lena eat. They feel that they are enabling this behavior and that learning to feed oneself is an important self-help skill. In fact, it is one of the questions on the Ages & Stages Questionnaire, a screening tool used in the program. When Lena approaches her caregivers, expecting them to feed her, they respond, "You're a big kid now, use your fork and spoon like all your friends." This upsets Lena and she will throw a major tantrum. Lena will eventually eat, but she only uses her hands, even for foods such as yogurt and mashed potatoes. Katherine has become frustrated and feels this is a challenging behavior.

Katherine speaks with Lena's parents, Priya and Simon. Katherine shares her observation, what she has tried to do to help Lena, and Lena's response when the staff do not feed her. Priya and Simon say they feed Lena at home. Priya explains that she is Indian, and it is typical for Indian parents to feed their children well into elementary school. She further explains that in Indian culture, hand feeding children is a way to nurture and show affection. Simon spoke of how they went through this same situation with Ben, their 7-year-old. When Ben was in preschool, he eventually learned that using utensils at mealtime was the expectation for that environment. Ben's preschool teachers didn't force the issue or mind if he made a mess when using his hands, and they always made sure utensils were available for him. Eventually, Ben realized that his friends used forks and spoons and he decided that he wanted to as well. Priya and Simon said they still sometimes hand feed Ben at home, when he requests. Katherine tries to appear understanding, but to her this is very odd parenting behavior. She doesn't understand why Priya and Simon do not value Lena learning to be more independent. Katherine is concerned that when Lena transitions to a preschool room, Lena's new caregivers will think Katherine didn't bother to teach Lena how to use a fork and spoon and think poorly of her caregiving skills.