

Common Causes of Challenging Behaviors in Birth to Three Classrooms

Developmental limitations:

Young children lack the cognitive and emotional skills to effectively manage their feelings, leading to outbursts when overwhelmed.

Communication difficulties:

Not being able to express needs verbally can lead to frustration and challenging behaviors as a way to communicate.

Unmet needs:

Feeling hungry, tired, uncomfortable, or bored can trigger challenging behaviors as a way to signal these needs.

Testing boundaries:

Toddlers naturally explore their environment and may test limits to understand what is acceptable behavior.

Attention seeking:

Sometimes, even negative attention can be reinforcing, leading to challenging behaviors to gain a caregiver's response. Be careful of removing children from the environment or openly talk about the child in their presence. This could lead to reinforcing the challenging behaviors or increase the amount of behaviors.

Sensory overload:

Too much stimulation can overwhelm a young child, leading to behaviors like crying or withdrawing. Examples: loud music, bright lights or colors, loud classroom noises including teachers' voices, noise from adjacent classrooms,

Environmental factors:

Changes in routine, unfamiliar situations and/or people, or a stressful home environment can contribute to challenging behaviors. Avoid abrupt changes in the child's environment like shifting children for ratio purposes.

Temperament:

Some children are naturally more sensitive or intense in their emotional responses, making them more prone to challenging behaviors.

Inappropriate Expectations:

These expectations include, long transitions, too many transitions, making children share, making young children sit for long periods of time, having to do without their comfort objects (Pacifiers or blankets), being expected to control their emotions, understand the effects of their actions, having mature social skills and having self help skills before they are ready.

13 Tips and Strategies for Helping Children with Challenging Behaviors

1. **Do not give a choice if there is none.** When a toddler or two year old is in a situation where there is only one acceptable outcome or action, you should NOT present it as a "choice." Instead, clearly state what needs to be done, as giving a false option can lead to confusion and power struggles with a young child who is still developing their understanding of decision-making.
2. **Use positive strategies.** Focus on teaching and guiding appropriate behaviors through positive reinforcement rather than punishment, which is ineffective at this age due to their developmental stage. Help them learn self-regulation, build strong caregiver bonds, and develop healthy coping mechanisms while fostering a sense of security and trust.
3. **Explain why a specific behavior is not allowed.** Use simple reasons. Say, "It is not safe to stand on a chair. I want to keep you safe. Let's jump down," and hold the child's hand. Or, "We need to walk down the hall." Next, say to the child softly, "If we run, we may fall. Thank you for walking slowly."
4. **Tell the children what you want them to do, NOT what they shouldn't do.** Telling a young child what they *can* do instead of what they cannot do is more effective because it provides positive guidance, focuses on desired behaviors, and helps them understand clear expectations. Avoid focusing on negative actions, which can be confusing and lead to defiance, especially for young children who are still developing their understanding of language and rules.
5. **Have enough toys accessible and duplicates of popular toys.** Toddlers and twos need "enough" toys because play is central to development. A variety of toys allows them to explore different skills like fine motor coordination, cognitive engagement, and language through different types of play, and ensures they aren't overwhelmed by too many options. Choose toys for their developmental stage rather than just having a large quantity. Having duplicates of popular items like dolls and trucks decreases frustration and encourages positive interactions.

6. **Go outside.** Taking infants, toddlers, and twos outside is important for managing discipline issues. Outdoor play helps regulate their emotions, provides sensory stimulation, burns off excess energy, and offers a fresh environment for learning and exploring. Gross motor play can significantly reduce behavioral frustrations that might lead to disciplinary problems.

7. **Comment when children are behaving well.** Point out when children are behaving well. This reinforces the positive behavior, increasing the likelihood of them repeating that behavior in the future. It builds self-esteem, and creates a positive feedback loop that encourages good conduct. By acknowledging positive actions, you are showing them that you appreciate and value their good behavior.

8. **Refrain from using negative verbal or nonverbal responses.** Negative verbal or nonverbal responses can significantly impact very young children. Negative interactions can lead to feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, anxiety, and behavioral issues. Children are highly sensitive to the emotional tone and body language of caregivers. Young children often interpret negative cues as rejection or disapproval, which can hinder their healthy development and ability to form secure relationships.

9. **Help make children aware of how their actions affect others.** By understanding how their actions make others feel, children learn to see situations from different perspectives and respond with empathy and kindness. Also the teacher can admit when they make a mistake and say I'm sorry.

10. **Help children learn to use communication to solve problems.** Helping toddlers and twos learn to use verbal communication to solve problems lays the foundation for their social and emotional development. Communication allows them to express their needs, navigate conflicts, and manage frustrations, leading to better relationships and overall well-being. It also strengthens their cognitive skills by enabling them to solve problems and find solutions through verbal expression.

11. Model appropriate behaviors (don't sit on shelves or tables, use your manners).

Teachers should model appropriate classroom behavior for toddlers and twos because young children learn primarily through imitation. By observing their teachers' actions, they readily pick up on expected behaviors like sharing, taking turns, listening attentively, using a quiet voice (not yelling), and respecting others. These behaviors are crucial for creating a positive learning environment in the classroom.

12. Know child development milestones so that you have reasonable expectations.

Knowing development milestones is essential when planning activities, allowing you to tailor experiences that are challenging yet achievable, and designed to support the skills of each developmental stage. This knowledge ensures children are progressing at their own pace while maximizing their potential. It helps you create activities that are engaging for the child's current abilities, identifying areas where they need extra support or can be encouraged to develop new skills.

13. Create predictable but flexible routines for infants and toddlers. This provides a sense of security and stability, allowing them to feel safe as they understand what to expect throughout the day. Emotional security helps with social, emotional, and cognitive skill development, while allowing room for adjustments based on their individual needs.

Wittmer, D.S., & A.S. Honig. 2020. *Day to Day the Relationship Way: Creating Responsive Programs for Infants and Toddlers*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

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