Emerson, a spirited 4-year-old, is participating in daily circle time in an integrated public school preschool classroom. During this organized, teacher-directed activity it is almost impossible to keep him in his space. An educational assistant (EA) is usually assigned to sit with him and remind him of the classroom rules and procedures. Emerson shows little interest in listening, participating, or interacting with his peers. As a result he is generally removed from circle and an EA reads to him from a book of his choice. Many times Emerson is distracted. For example, even when being read a favorite book, if he sees older students walking past the classroom door, he will dart into the hallway to watch them as they change classes.

Children like Emerson are found in most preschool classrooms, in both public and private settings. Their behaviors are challenging to teachers and families alike, who want children to experience the best possible educational and developmentally appropriate experiences.

Early childhood professionals face varied and novel challenges with diverse populations and the increase of inclusive preschool classrooms. Children with exceptionalities often have delays in social skills that are comparable to delays in cognitive or academic areas (Richey & Wheeler, 2000). “Many of these children bring into the educational setting an array of social/emotional issues that challenge the professional’s expertise and resources of teachers and programs alike” (Wheeler, 2000, p. 73).

In addition, children with disabilities may be withdrawn or exhibit aggressive behaviors along with limited verbal or nonverbal skills (Pavri & Luftig, 2000). It is also important to remember that at any time any child without exceptionalities can develop challenging behaviors because of minor illness, death of a loved one, divorce of parents, or other stressors within the family or elsewhere.

Positive Methods Are Paramount

Providing positive environments for all children is important. In programs where children with challenging behaviors are present, positive methods are paramount. Emerson’s EA read to him a book of his choice, which was read with interest. Emerson was able to participate in the circle time, and he was able to focus on the activity at hand. Emerson was also able to interact with his peers, which helped him to develop social skills.

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behaviors are present, it is important that teachers collaborate with other professionals who specialize in children with special needs, including behavioral needs. However, in inclusive child care settings, only 25% of early childhood professionals report that they are able to work directly with special educators (Horn, Leiber, Li, Sandall, & Schwartz, 2000; Schepis, Reid, Ownby & Parsons, 2001). This lack of involvement with special educators can greatly affect the learning and nurturing environment of at-risk children being served in inclusive settings.

Why Is It Important to Address Challenging Behaviors?

Challenging behaviors exhibited by young children should be addressed. These behaviors typically do not disappear without intervention. Children’s challenging behaviors interfere with their learning and ability to develop relationships with peers. Suppressing problem behaviors in young children can have long-term negative effects that may lead to aggressive behaviors as children develop (Durand, 1999). Uninformed adult behaviors may actually reinforce children’s challenging behavior rather than redirect or correct it. In addition, excessive adult demands may contribute to children becoming confused and aggressive.

These concerns support the need for early childhood educational professionals to plan learning environments (physical and social) that meet the needs of all children, including those with challenging behaviors. Plans should facilitate learning and encourage positive interactions for children within their natural environments. The guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) including culturally appropriate practices, and the guidelines of Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS, described in this article) can be merged to provide best and appropriate practices for children with challenging behaviors. The successful merging of these two concepts maximizes benefits for all children and can easily be applied to various programs.

Children’s Behavior and Behavioral Functions. Young children may exhibit challenging behaviors in an attempt to gain peer or teacher attention, escape a task demand, or obtain sensory feedback or a tangible item. Several basic concepts about children’s behavior need to be understood as a basis for all child guidance programs.

- **Behavior is learned** (Bandura, 1997; Kazdin, 1989). This concept offers the hope that new, appropriate skills can be taught to replace socially inappropriate and challenging behaviors.
- **Behavior is a form of communication.** Children express their desires or needs with behaviors.
- **Behavior has a function or purpose.** Children’s behaviors ultimately help them to get their needs met. Therefore, it is necessary to know the functions of children’s behavior (Wheeler & Richey, 2005). Are children trying to gain attention, or escape a situation or activity? Perhaps children want feedback or some tangible item.

After the function of the challenging behavior is determined, adults can determine how to replace the inappropriate behavior by teaching a more socially appropriate behavior to meet the same need, and then provide appropriate specific reinforcement and encouragement for the desired behavior (Horner & Carr, 1997).

What Is Positive Behavioral Support?

PBS is an approach to teaching and facilitating appropriate child behavior that is

- preventive
- proactive
- flexible
- positive
- child-centered
The underlying principle of positive behavioral supports is to respond to children in a non-punitive and educative manner to achieve socially important behavior changes (Turnbull, Wilcox, Stowe, & Turnbull, 2001). It is important to identify the components of PBS that are workable and practical for early childhood programs. Basically, PBS requires the educator to understand:

1) methods of remaining positive with children who are exhibiting challenging behaviors and why it is important to remain positive,
2) functions of children’s behavior, and
3) supports that teach children ways to act appropriately and teach adults how to respond appropriately.

Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) is an approach to teaching and facilitating appropriate child behavior that is

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PBS addresses the ABCs of behavior, which are

- antecedents (A),
- the behaviors (B), and
- the consequences (C).

Strategies of PBS include observing and determining the antecedents of children’s challenging behavior, the actual behavior, and the consequences of the behavior (Wheeler & Richey, 2005). Antecedents are environmental factors or events that occur before the actual behavior. Consequences are events or responses that occur after the behavior.

Teachers and caregivers can change aspects of the environment that trigger the behavior (for example, prompt the child to “point to the book”). The appropriate behavior (pointing to the book) results in a change in the consequences or aspects of the environment that follows the behavior (for example, the child gets the book). Changing the antecedents or consequences of behavior can teach children more acceptable ways of getting their needs met. PBS also provides a continuum of support across settings emphasizing prevention while recognizing the intensity of the behavior (Sugai, et al., 1999).

Merging PBS and DAP

Common threads of Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) and PBS include the following:

1) both methods are child-centered;
2) both methods emphasize children’s choices and the development of problem-solving skills; and
3) both methods value the child as an individual with respect to family, culture, and social context.

Merging DAP and PBS results in techniques that are positive, focused on teaching (not punishment), and offer choices. The merging of these two methods results in positive strategies focusing on the strengths of individual children.

Additional common threads of DAP and PBS include development of environments where children can be successful, setting limits appropriate to the developmental levels of children, and teaching appropriate skills by modeling, redirection, and explanation of those limits. Finally, both methods include opportunities for children to practice appropriate behaviors in developmentally and culturally appropriate environments where each activity provides an opportunity for learning.

Techniques in positive behavioral supports are behaviorally based and build upon the understanding of both DAP and child development. Guidance is accomplished by teaching children to understand appropriate behavior and by building children’s self-esteem and supporting the development of self-regulation (Charlesworth, 1998). Through the use of these techniques children experience enhanced learning outcomes.

Examples of positive behavioral support techniques include the use of appropriate instructional cues, effective environmental structure, predictable schedules, embedded instruction, and the use of reinforcements and preferred activities. This routine illustrates these techniques.

Every day after finishing lunch, the children are verbally directed while the teacher points to the circle area. The circle is located in a corner of the room away from distractions. Children who follow the directions are rewarded with preferential seating or tangible items.

Behavior is a form of communication.

In this example, the appropriate instruction cue was the teacher’s verbal directing and pointing. Effective environmental structure was the circle area located away from distractions. In regard to the predictable schedule, circle time occurs every day after lunch. Embedded instruction occurs when ongoing or continuous prompts allow children to know what is expected.

Another option, called the Premack Principle, may be used in both early
childhood programs and in the home. This strategy is described as “engaging in a highly preferred activity as a consequence for performing a less preferred activity” (Richards, Taylor, Ramasamy, & Richards, 1999, p. 26). A common example is to get dessert (a cookie) after eating lunch (soup and sandwich). The highly preferred activity is individual and is specific to the child’s behavior. When using this concept in a group setting, the adult follows a less preferred behavior by the child (for example, going to circle area) with a more desired consequence (for example, sitting in a preferred place). The goal is to exchange inappropriate behaviors for more functional skills (Turnbull, Brennan, Stowe, Raper, & Hedges, 2000).

PBS in an Early Childhood Program

In an acknowledgement of the importance of developmentally appropriate practices and positive behavioral supports, a study was conducted to determine if these concepts were identified or valued by child care providers. This study was also conducted to determine if child care providers in a rural setting, who were given minimal training and support, could incorporate PBS guidance strategies into the everyday activities of their DAP program.

A child care facility in a Southern state received a grant to provide child care for approximately 20 families with at-risk children. Some of the children exhibited various challenging behaviors, such as running from the classroom, biting, throwing food during lunch, and hitting the teacher or peers. The professionals in the program were interested in obtaining knowledge and skills that would help them successfully include all children in the program, even those with challenging behaviors.

Early childhood teachers with only minimum consultation from trained staff can identify methods for incorporating instruction on specific objectives into ongoing routines (Schepis, et al., 2001). All professionals involved in working with children with exceptionalities are urged to receive training in positive behavioral supports every 3 years through in-service training along with continuing education and other professional development activities (Turnbull, Wilcox, Stowe, & Turnbull, 2001). Not all early childhood programs have access to behavioral specialists. Therefore, additional research is needed to identify how early childhood teachers can develop strategies that are workable and practical within their classrooms.

For this study, a training package was implemented to provide instruction on the principles and techniques of positive behavioral supports and how to successfully merge PBS and DAP for the participating program. The skills were presented in six, one-hour in-service meetings at the center during 6 months. In addition, individual teacher support within the classroom setting was included.

The underlying principle of positive behavioral supports is to respond to children in a non-punitive and educative manner to achieve socially important behavior changes.

The training package included instruction on children’s temperaments; adult behaviors and redirection, arranging the child care environment, use of instructional cues, family collaboration, and various types of reinforcement. Instructional strategies used in the training included discussion, brainstorming, role-
In pairing DAP with PBS, direct and indirect guidance strategies were shared with teachers. Some examples included setting and explaining limits, redirecting behaviors, and changing the contexts or settings of children’s behavior. The use of signals and cues, ignoring behavior, providing options or choices, and encouraging movement and action were also included. Caregivers were taught to observe for teachable moments and to insert direct instruction at opportune times.

In addition, caregivers were taught how to modify materials, activities/instruction, and the environment so that children with disabilities could be included in regular classroom activities. Modification of the physical environment included instruction on room arrangement, appropriate and accessible materials, and having a sufficient supply of materials. Other techniques utilized in PBS included the use of routines with only gradual changes, the use of transitional objects to symbolize transitions, and the combination of visual and verbal cues.

Challenges for Early Educators

Pre-assessment questionnaires of teacher perceptions on behavior were given at the beginning of the first meeting and at the end of the last meeting. Questionnaire responses were then compared. The pre-assessment indicated that the teachers strongly agreed with the concept of understanding the functions of behaviors. The majority of the teachers felt they could easily identify behavioral functions. However, in the post-assessment the teachers responded that they found it difficult to identify behavioral functions. This may have resulted because new information required teachers to look at situations differently.

A shift in caregiver attitudes related to the family-professional partnership was evident as well. A major area
where change was noted was in the caregivers’ responses about communication. Obstacles in classroom management and child guidance were also initially indicated by caregivers. Their concerns were: allowing sick children to attend; lack of discipline in the home; lack of preschool and home consistency with regard to children’s behavioral limits; how to address diversity in the classroom; and lack of parental support.

However, after the training sessions, caregivers noted the following as important: concerns regarding classroom size and available help; the importance of determining functions of behavior, and the importance of more effective family collaboration. Apparently the caregivers’ focus shifted more to what they controlled and the changes they could make in the educational environment.

After the training, one yearly conference was seen as not enough for the caregivers and parents of young children. In addition, policy changes were highlighted. For example, the caregivers wanted to establish policies to ensure effective negotiation when differences concerning challenging issues occurred. Caregivers agreed that children’s learning would be enhanced through open and frequent communication with families. Family input on activities within the facility was also stated as important.

The successful merging of these two concepts and its application to the child care environment was new to the teachers. However, in evaluating the results of the pre-and post-assessments it became evident that there was a shift in participants’ focus and attitude. The shift from blaming parents and children’s home environments to a position of professional self-evaluation, including evaluation of the classroom environment, was a successful result of the training. Even the teachers’ awareness and recognition of diversity became an obvious change in attitude and focus.

It was evident that as a result of the training, teachers became more aware of the physical arrangement of the child care environment. They also began utilizing information regarding temperament when working with children with challenging behaviors. The approach to Emerson’s behavior changed dramatically.

When discussions occurred with Emerson’s child care providers concerning his behaviors, some very important factors became apparent. Emerson truly enjoyed the one-on-one attention he received when he was removed from circle time. When placed in the reading area beside the door, he received even more attention by running into the hallway with students who were changing classes. Teachers determined by these observations and discussion that a function of his behavior was to gain attention.

They then decided that the physical environment could be modified to shift his means of obtaining attention. Emerson’s teacher worked with others to change the physical arrangement of the room so that the reading corner would not be near the door. She also began utilizing the Premack Principle. She used the desire he had for one-on-one attention as positive reinforcement when he participated for minimal amounts of time during circle. The time spent in circle gradually increased over the next few weeks.

Research by Worley and Gast (2000) regarding the Premack Principle indicates that infrequent behavior increases when reinforced with behaviors that occur more often. For example, Emerson received more one-on-one interaction with a caregiver (which he desired) as reinforcement for staying in circle time (which is the behavior the teacher desired).

The results of this study indicated that with instruction and minimal consultation, early childhood teachers could incorporate positive behavioral supports into developmentally appropriate practices and integrate PBS techniques into ongoing classroom routines. In addition, the results of this training also supported research (Horn, et al., 2000) that indicates that training, especially systematic, long-term training with support mechanisms in place, has a significant impact on teachers’ attitudes and understanding of diverse classroom environments.

Conclusions

When implementing a similar training in any early childhood program, it is important that educators understand how socioeconomic conditions, family structures, relationships, family stress, formal and informal support, and having a child with an exceptionality impacts family dynamics (Building Family and Community Relationships, 2002). Knowledge of these and other factors creates a deeper understanding of young children’s lives.

When challenging behaviors occur, teachers first identify the function of the behavior, observe the environ-
ment where the behavior occurs, and finally observe the reaction or consequence of the behavior. By manipulating the antecedents or consequences of challenging behavior, that behavior may be altered. This knowledge is crucial to enhance the teacher’s ability to help children learn and develop.

Training and support for early childhood educators are necessary for the successful inclusion of young children with special needs and challenging behaviors. The authors recommend that training should continue to include the merging of PBS and DAP in order to effectively meet the needs of families, children, and staff in early childhood programs.

References


Child behavior in the early childhood program is a major concern for most professionals. This easy to read book provides a review of direct and indirect guidance techniques and helpful exercises designed to put these techniques into action. A wonderful resource for parents as well as seasoned teachers. 30 pp. (2002)

Powerful, Positive and Practical Practices: Behavior Guidance Strategies
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Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Merging Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Positive Behavioral Supports

Kim Moffett, Melinda Swafford, and Linda Richey

What is challenging behavior?
Challenging behavior is behavior that places a child or others at risk for harm. It occurs frequently. It prevents the child from accessing positive outcomes, such as successful peer interaction and school performance.

Why does challenging behavior occur?
- Children may have delays in social skills or cognitive development.
- Children may be withdrawn.
- Children may be aggressive.
- Children may have negative verbal or nonverbal skills.
- Children may have had or are experiencing stressors in their lives, such as illness, death of a loved one, or their parents' divorce.

Remember, behavior...
- is learned
- serves a function
- is a form of communication
- is usually relevant to its context

ABCs of behavior
A = antecedents...what occurs before the behavior
B = behavior...child's actions
C = consequences...what occurs after the behavior

Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS) are...
- preventive
- proactive
- flexible
- positive
- child-centered

PBS and DAP use positive, direct guidance
- Limits are set and explained.
- Behavior is redirected by changing the context or the setting.
- Some behavior is ignored.
- Behavioral skills are taught.
- Adults use signals and cues for appropriate behavior.
- Children are allowed to practice the more appropriate behaviors.

For More Information

Books

Web sites
http://www.circleofinclusion.org
http://www.naeyc.org
http://www.pbis.org

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.