



## **Annoying and Frustrating or Challenging and Problematic?**

Joey grabs another child's toy; Lanie kicks at you defiantly and screams, "No!"; Bill bites his sister on the arm; Ryan has a complete meltdown at the grocery store, lying on the floor kicking and screaming; Nolan withdraws and won't participate in circle time. There isn't a parent or teacher who hasn't witnessed these behaviors and hundreds of others like them. Are these challenging behaviors? Sure they are - to you, to the other kids in the group, and to the child at the time. Do they fit the definition of *challenging behavior* that requires a deeper look and possible referral? Unfortunately, it's not that simple.

### **When is Challenging Behavior NOT Challenging Behavior?**

All kids demonstrate what we loosely call *challenging behavior* at one time or another - they wouldn't be developing if they didn't. Many behaviors that are associated with a particular age or stage of development.

**Babies:** fuss and cry; may bite; refuse food or spit it out; are attracted to off-limit things.

**Toddlers and twos:** have big feelings and may be intense; have tantrums; bite and hit; grab toys that others are playing with; resist help even when they need it; refuse naps and bedtime; deliberately do what you've told them not to do; and love to say "No!"

**Threes and fours:** can be mean; hit and bite sometimes; resist sharing; can be argumentative and defiant; may take and hide things they want; may try to "cover up" their mistakes by denying or blaming others; have trouble waiting and controlling impulses; may say things like, "I hate you!" when very mad.

**Fives through eights:** can be stubborn and controlling; resentful of being told what to do; can be mean to others; may steal and lie; may try to "cheat" at games; don't like to be criticized.

### **Are There Other Explanations for Challenging Behavior?**

Children experiencing family stress may express their hurt, anger, anxiety, and worry by resorting to behavior that they've outgrown - and this may last awhile. That's why it's so important to partner with families and find out what's going on at home, while being understanding and supportive of the kids during this time. Of course, it doesn't mean that their behavior is accepted or permitted, just that the underlying reasons are understood. And, because we're all vulnerable to anxiety, stress, fatigue, illness, worry, and other deep feelings, children and adults of any age may lose composure and become dysregulated, behaving in ways that are not age-appropriate, and usually feeling regret afterwards.

Children with special needs such as language delays, sensory processing difficulties, and other disabilities may exhibit "trying" behaviors as well, and getting help from their special education team is essential.

### **Should I Address the Behaviors Described Above?**

You are probably already using responsive interaction, management strategies, curriculum, and the physical environment to lessen the likelihood of occurrence of trying behaviors. This is the bottom of the pyramid - prevention. You might also use the Colorado Early Learning Standards, which suggest helpful adult interaction strategies for each stage of social-emotional development. Successful parents and teachers have been doing some or all of the following for years:

- Use routines and tell kids in advance if there are changes coming.

- Give kids choices and "lead from behind." In other words, let them think they are in control!

- Keep each child's temperament in mind.

- Praise liberally - catch them behaving well.

- Anticipate behavior by learning each child's cues and offering support before problems happen.

- Try to distract the child before s/he gets overwhelmed.

- If a meltdown happens, stay calm. Make sure everyone is safe. Don't try and talk the child out of it. Instead, "Strike while the iron is cold," (Fred Pine, M.D.) which means wait until a better time to talk about what happened.

- Use humor but make sure the child doesn't feel dismissed or belittled.

- Use "time-in."

- Teach skills exactly - they have to know specifically what you want them to do. "Be nice!" is much too vague and abstract.

- Use basic words for their feelings.

- Model what you want. If you don't want kids to yell, don't yell at them.

The Zero to Three website has great tips and tools for dealing with these types of trying behaviors. You can share these with parents, too.

<http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/tips-tools-challenging-behaviors.html>

### **So, What is Challenging Behavior?**

There is some disagreement about this but generally, it's behavior that persists over time despite all the strategies you use that are successful with other children. It prevents the child from forming and enjoying relationships. The behavior interferes with learning and development. It can be harmful to the child or to others. These are the behaviors for which you seek help.

Kaiser and Rasminsky have written a great book: *Challenging Behavior in Young Children: Understanding, Preventing, and Responding Effectively*.