Preventing and Addressing Challenging Behavior: Common Questions and Practical Strategies

Ms. Li’s preschool classroom is an engaging place for young children, and she always has great activities planned. Currently, the children are very excited about a project they are working on related to water. However, Ms. Li has 17 children in the classroom, and in her words, “There are lots of challenging behaviors.” It seems like children are always taking things from one another, crying, arguing, leaving group activities, and whining when the time comes to change activities. Ms. Li reports that she does not know how to deal with all the behavior issues. She finds herself bracing for the many “breakdowns” and challenging behaviors that occur each day. One day she asked her supervisor, “How in the world do I address all of these challenging behaviors? Some days are not that bad, but some are really horrible, and these behavior problems make me question my skills as a teacher.”

Ms. Li’s question is not uncommon among early childhood educators. Teachers report increasing numbers of children with challenging behavior and increasing frustration with the effects of those behaviors on the tone and routines of the classroom (Campbell, 2002; Hemmeter, Cheatham, & Corso, 2006). Teachers are often anxious to find strategies that they can use to “deal with” challenging behaviors when they occur. However, many challenging behaviors in preschool classrooms can be prevented by designing environments that promote children’s engagement, helping children learn what to do, and teaching children new social skills and emotional competencies (Conroy, Brown, & Olive, 2008; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Joseph & Strain, 2006; Lawry, Danko, & Strain, 1999; Neilsen, Olive, Donovan, & McEvoy, 1999; Strain & Hemmeter, 1999).

Let’s return to Ms. Li’s question—“How in the world do I address all of these challenging behaviors? Some days are not that bad but some are really horrible and these behavior problems make me question my skills as a teacher.” There is no easy answer to this
question. As much as Ms. Li would like a quick fix, there are no quick fixes for challenging behavior. To address the full range of challenging behaviors that occur in early childhood classrooms, teachers need a comprehensive approach that focuses not only on addressing challenging behavior but also, more importantly, on what to do to prevent challenging behavior from occurring in the first place.

Fox and her colleagues (2003) described a framework for promoting children’s social emotional development, and preventing and addressing children’s challenging behavior. This framework is represented as the The Teaching Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Development and Addressing Challenging Behavior (see Figure 1) and includes effective practices designed to support children’s success in classrooms, promote children’s social emotional development, and address and prevent challenging behaviors. Within the Teaching Pyramid, four levels of practice are described and are designed to promote the social emotional development of all children, including those with persistent challenging behavior (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). The Teaching Pyramid provides preschool teachers with universal strategies for addressing social emotional development and challenging behavior in all children, secondary strategies for teaching social skills and emotional competencies to children who are at risk or who need more individualized teaching, and tertiary strategies for children whose behaviors are persistent even when the other levels of the Pyramid are in place. Universal strategies include building positive relationships with children and other caregivers, creating a positive classroom climate, supporting peer interactions, implementing a consistent and predictable schedule, structuring routines so the children know what to do and what is expected of them, designing and implementing engaging and appropriately challenging activities, and using developmentally appropriate guidance strategies such as redirection, clear directions, and positive, descriptive feedback. Secondary strategies focus on intentionally teaching social skills and promoting emotional competence.

The Teaching Pyramid provides information about what skills should be taught, the strategies for teaching those skills, and ensuring adequate opportunities for children to practice the skills across the day. At the tertiary level, a team-based process is used to conduct a functional assessment and develop a behavior support plan for children who engage in ongoing challenging behavior. The plan includes strategies for preventing challenging behavior, supporting the child’s use of new behaviors to replace the
Thus, the purpose of this article is to offer preschool teachers strategies for preventing challenging behavior and supporting the development of social skills and emotional competencies. This article is framed in a question and answer format using questions from teachers who the authors have worked with in the past, teachers like Ms. Li (names have been changed). These questions and strategies are organized around the four levels of the Teaching Pyramid: (a) developing nurturing and responsive relationships, (b) designing social and physical environments to support children’s social emotional development and prevent challenging behavior, (c) teaching social skills and promoting emotional competencies, and (d) designing individualized interventions for children with ongoing challenging behavior.

Developing Nurturing and Responsive Relationships

The foundation of the Teaching Pyramid is establishing nurturing and responsive relationships with
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In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Likewise, developing a positive relationship early with each child’s family is important in terms of helping them support their child’s social emotional development. This relationship then provides a safe context for tackling difficult issues related to challenging behaviors, should they arise.

Build Positive Relationships With Every Child Every Day

When children engage in challenging behavior, especially behavior that is aggressive or disruptive, teachers often have a hard time establishing positive relationships with them. The

| Table 1 |
| Teacher Tools Related to Implementing the Teaching Pyramid |

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following scenario provides an example of this situation:

I have a preschool student, Sadie, who engages in a lot of challenging behaviors. She whines on a daily basis, is clingy, and has meltdowns that involve crying and screaming. Her behaviors really push my buttons, and I find myself having a hard time even “liking” her. How do I get past this barrier between Sadie and myself?

Positive relationships between adults and children provide a supportive context for teaching new skills, as well as addressing challenging behavior (Joseph & Strain, 2004). Support and attention from adults is important to children. Unfortunately, some children, like Sadie, who engage in challenging behaviors are more likely to have interactions with adults that are directive in nature or focused on their challenging behavior rather than interactions that provide positive feedback for appropriate behavior and support for learning new skills. As these positive relationships develop, children feel supported and safe, become more confident and willing to try new things, persist at difficult tasks, and ask for assistance when they need help.

An important goal for all early childhood teachers is to try to have a positive, supportive interaction with every child in their classroom every day. This may take the form of guiding a child through a social problem (e.g., sharing a toy with a peer), providing positive feedback about something the child has done well, or engaging in a conversation with the child about something in which the child is interested. While it is easy to develop positive relationships with many young children, developing such relationships can be more difficult with children who engage in ongoing challenging behavior. When working with children like Sadie, teachers should focus more of their attention on the child’s positive behaviors than on the negative behaviors. Strategies to help accomplish this include (a) increasing the frequency of one-on-one interactions around materials and toys Sadie likes, (b) identifying skills Sadie lacks and focusing interactions on supporting the development of those skills, and (c) reframing Sadie’s behavior as communicative and helping her communicate her message in more appropriate ways (Fox & Lentini, 2006).

Build Meaningful Partnerships With Families

Teachers often express concern about how to talk to families about their child’s challenging behavior. Teachers may feel uncomfortable initiating difficult conversations and may fear that family members will become defensive or that they themselves may be blamed for the child’s behavior. Consider the following scenario:
Parent–teacher conferences are coming up soon. I am really concerned about Robin’s challenging behavior, and I want to talk to his family about it. However, I don’t even really know his family. How do I approach this topic when I only have 15 minutes scheduled for each parent conference?

This teacher has a variety of challenges to deal with, including having only 15 min for each conference and not having an existing relationship with the parents in which the teacher feels comfortable enough to bring up a potentially difficult issue. Effective early childhood education is built on meaningful relationships between teachers and families. These relationships do not develop instantly but are instead built over a period of time with mutual trust and respect serving as the foundation (Barrera, Corso, & Macpherson, 2003; Cheatham & Santos, 2005). It is critical to build these relationships with all families so that a strong foundation or partnership is established prior to having to address challenging behavior. These relationships can provide a context for discussing why a child’s behavior appears to have changed or working with families to identify strategies for promoting their children’s social emotional development. It is also in the context of these relationships that teachers can learn about a child’s interests, needs, and abilities along with family beliefs, values, and cultural practices. Importantly, these positive relationships between families and professionals provide a supportive context in which to address challenging behavior should the need arise (Fettig & Ostrosky, 2011).

In the case of Robin, there are a number of strategies that could be considered. First, it will be important for the teacher to work toward developing a trusting relationship with the parents before the conference. To work toward this relationship, the teacher should share with Robin’s parents positive information about him as well as the challenges faced by Robin and the teacher. The teacher could then call Robin’s parents ahead of the scheduled conference time and explain the plans for the conference, ask the parents to identify any goals or concerns they have about their son, and identify an additional time to meet with the parents to further discuss what was addressed in the parent–teacher conference. Second, the teacher should collect specific, objective data about Robin’s behavior that is of concern to the teacher. When meeting with Robin’s parents, it will be important to have these data so they can discuss the behavior objectively rather than emotionally. Consider the difference between these two ways of presenting information about Robin’s behavior: “Your child’s behavior is out of control all day long” versus “Over a 3-day period, we observed Robin engaging in challenging behavior such as hitting other children, taking toys, and
screaming. These behaviors were observed approximately 4 times per day and happened during less-structured times of the day including free play and when we were on the playground.

Finally, the teacher should present the situation to the parents in the context of soliciting their input and suggestions related to this issue rather than blaming them or suggesting that events at home might be causing the challenging behavior. If the parents report not seeing the behaviors of concern at home, they might be able to describe how the structure of their home environment or routines might account for differences in Robin’s behavior and provide the teacher with information that could be useful in the classroom.

Designing Social and Physical Environments to Support Children’s Social Emotional Development and Prevent Challenging Behavior

The next level of the Teaching Pyramid focuses on how to structure the social and physical environment to promote children’s social emotional development and prevent challenging behavior. When environments are structured such that children feel safe and supported and know what to do, when to do it, and what is expected of them, children may be less likely to engage in challenging behavior.

Structure Routines, Transitions, and Activities so Children Know What to Do, How to Do It, and When to Do It

The following scenario provides an example of how these variables might affect children’s behavior:

It seems like lots of children have behavior problems in my classroom this year. I am doing the same thing I have always done, and I have not had these kinds of problems before. Children have problems during circle, when we are walking down the hall to go outside, during center time, and during snack. I just can’t figure out what is going on. Where do I even begin?

A key strategy for preventing challenging behavior is related to the design and implementation of the schedule (Lawry et al., 1999; Strain & Hemmeter, 1999). There are three critical components of a well-planned schedule. First, implement a consistent schedule to help the children learn what to do. When the schedule changes from day to day, it is difficult for children to learn the routine. Children feel comfortable and confident if they can anticipate what will come next as their school day progresses from arrival to departure time. Second, minimize the transitions in which the children spend time...
waiting without having anything to do. This can be accomplished by minimizing the number of transitions where all children have to move at the same time in the same way. For example, rather than having children transition to and from a large-group snack time, snack can be designed as a center time activity in which children can participate as they become hungry (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, & Kinder, 2008). Transition times also can be structured so that the children have something to do while they wait for other children to complete a transition. For instance, teachers can lead children in listening to a story, singing a song, or playing a game. Third, teach classroom routines and expectations. Whereas some children will learn the routines and expectations simply by participating in them, other children will need to be taught in more individualized and systematic ways. Picture schedules, visual prompts, peer buddies, and teacher assistance can be used to teach routines and expectations.

Create Activities That Are Engaging

Engagement is key to preventing challenging behavior (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007). When children are actively involved in doing something they enjoy, they are less likely to engage in challenging behavior. Consider the following scenario:

The children in my pre-k room have such a wide range of skills, and I feel as if some are bored by the activities I put out for center time. How do I make my classroom a more exciting place to be so the children are playing with toys and working on activities instead of getting into trouble?

First, it is important to realize that not all children enjoy the same activities or can participate in activities in the same way. What is fun and exciting to one child might not appeal to another child, and what excites a child one day might not motivate or excite that same child the following day. Observation and ongoing assessment are key to pinpointing a child’s interests.

Second, activities should be structured such that children of differing ability levels can participate in ways that are appropriate for them. For example, one child might only need minimal verbal assistance from an adult when learning how to play with a new toy, whereas another child might need an adaptive device to interact with the toy, and a third child might benefit from a set of pictures that demonstrates how to make the toy work (Meadan, Ostrosky, Triplett, Michna, & Fettig, 2011; Sandall & Schwartz, 2008).

Teaching Social Skills and Promoting Emotional Competencies

The next level of the Teaching Pyramid highlights the need for
being intentional about teaching social skills and promoting emotional competencies. Important social emotional skills include friendship skills, emotional literacy, social problem solving, and anger management (Denham et al., 2003). For many children, supportive environments create a context for them to learn these social skills and emotional competencies. However, for some children, more intentional and focused teaching is necessary (Conroy et al., 2008; Fox & Lentini, 2006). Some children engage in challenging behavior, because they do not yet have the skills to communicate their needs in a more appropriate way. For example, a child may have a meltdown when told that it is time to clean up, because she does not know how to tell her teacher that she wants to save her block structure rather than take it apart. There are a number of strategies for supporting children in learning appropriate social, emotional, and communicative behaviors.

Acknowledging Appropriate Social Behavior

Adult attention and positive feedback are important tools in promoting children’s social skills and emotional competencies (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007; Webster-Stratton, 1999). Adult attention and feedback can be used to guide children through difficult social problems, model appropriate ways to communicate emotions, demonstrate strategies for interacting with peers, and confirm to children that their behavior is appropriate. The following question addresses the important role of adults in supporting children’s behavior.

As follow-up to staff development training on challenging behavior, Bernadette and her assistant, Amee, met with their supervisor to develop an action plan for their classroom. They asked their supervisor to observe their morning classroom and offer some ideas of changes that would have the greatest impact on the children’s challenging behavior. They wanted to know “what are one or two things we can change that might positively affect the children in our morning session?”

When interacting with children with challenging behavior, it is easy to “get caught up” spending most of our time addressing the challenging behavior rather than giving children time and attention for positive behavior. Teachers and other caregivers should acknowledge children when they engage in appropriate behavior and model appropriate ways to respond when one feels emotions such as happy, sad, frustrated, embarrassed, and mad (Joseph & Strain, 2006; Lawry et al., 1999). In response to Bernadette’s and Amee’s question, their supervisor suggests that they monitor their talk to the children in their classroom to ensure they are
spending a greater proportion of their time acknowledging and teaching appropriate behaviors and less time attending to challenging behavior (Timm & Doubet, 2007; Twardosz, 2005). She suggests that they begin by setting a beeper to go off every 2 min during centers. Each time it goes off, she suggests that Amee and Bernadette find an opportunity to acknowledge a child’s appropriate behavior and attend to children who are engaged with other children appropriately.

**Teach With Intention**

Children who are able to express their emotions appropriately, who can solve social problems, and who have positive social skills are less likely to engage in challenging behavior (Denham, 1986; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990). Questions such as the following ones posed by early childhood teachers often hint at the need to teach new skills to young children who have social emotional difficulties.

A group of preschool teachers, eating lunch together, is heard sharing concerns they have about the social emotional skills of their students. Some of the questions they ask each other are, “Why is it that every time Hank tries to play with other children in the block area he ends up in tears over a toy he wants?” “How come Maddy seems to react with hitting rather than using her words when she is angry?” and “Why is Joanie so shy and withdrawn even after 2 months in my classroom? She rarely joins the other children in play during center time, preferring to always be alone.”

To address the issues raised above, these teachers should focus on the skills that the children need to be more successful in their interactions (Ostrosky & Meadan, 2010). For example, Hank might need to learn problem-solving skills, Maddy might need to be taught how to indicate she is angry in an appropriate way, and Joanie might need support in scaffolding her interactions with peers. In each of these cases, teaching the children more appropriate skills might prevent challenging behavior. Supporting children’s use of these skills will require a systematic, intentional approach that includes teaching the skill or concept, talking about examples and nonexamples of target skills, supporting children’s use of the skill in naturally occurring contexts, and reviewing children’s use of the skill (Webster-Stratton, 1999). Such intentional teaching can occur during large-group instruction, small-group instruction, or one-to-one interactions with a child. The following vignette provides an example of how to intentionally teach a social skill.

To teach her preschoolers how to help each other, Ms. Li presents the concept during circle time using a book about children helping other children.
After she reads the story, Ms. Li asks the children to identify some times when they have needed help or when they have helped someone. Tate reports on an instance when he helped Samantha tie her shoes, and Isandro shares a story about helping his little sister put a straw in her juice box. Ms. Li reminds the children to help each other throughout the day.

During center time, Libby approaches Ms. Li and asks for help in the block area. Ms. Li prompts Libby to ask a friend for assistance in building a bridge. Libby goes back to the block area and asks Jaymin to help her. Jaymin helps Libby with the block structure, and Ms. Li comments, “Wow, you kids really worked hard together to build a big castle with a long bridge!” At the end of the day during group time, Ms. Li reminds the preschoolers about the importance of helping each other and asks if anyone helped someone else or had someone help them. Jacob raises his hand and says, “Miah couldn’t get the water on when she was washing her hands so I helped her turn on the faucet.” Ms. Li acknowledges Jacob’s assistance and listens as other children share examples. Helping each other will be discussed on an ongoing basis so all the children will learn the concept and be consistent about helping each other when they need assistance.

Teaching children how to interact positively with one another, how to be good problem solvers (Joseph & Strain, 2010), and how to express their emotions can be fun for children and teachers alike. There are many creative ways to teach these skills using games, puppets, children’s literature, and social stories (Joseph & Strain, 2003). Intentionally teaching social and emotional competencies skills in a fun and engaging way is key to preventing challenging behavior.

Designing Individualized Interventions for Children With Ongoing Challenging Behavior

While the strategies described above may prevent or reduce the intensity or frequency of challenging behavior for most children in a preschool classroom, there may be a small number of children whose behavior is not responsive to these promotion and prevention efforts. These children may need an individualized plan that is based on an understanding of the function of their challenging behavior. Ideally, this plan will be developed by a team of people, including but not limited to families, teaching staff, and behavior support professionals, who know and interact with the child on a regular basis so that the plan can be implemented across environments (e.g., home and child care, Head Start, and home). The following scenario focuses on a
child whose persistent challenging behavior requires an intensive team-based approach.

Mr. Malik’s classroom is an exciting, organized, and engaging environment for young children. He has been implementing a social skills curriculum and is pleased with how children are learning to use their words, help their friends, and use problem-solving strategies. Mr. Malik feels like he has designed a classroom that for the most part supports children’s social emotional development and prevents challenging behavior. That is . . . except for Jesse. While Jesse likes group time, he spends much of the rest of the day hitting children, taking his peers’ toys, and destroying materials. Mr. Malik and his assistant have tried a variety of strategies, including shadowing Jesse, calling his parents, and sending Jesse to the director’s office for a break. Nothing is working, and the frequency and intensity of the behavior is getting worse every day. This teaching team wants to know what to do next.

Developing a plan to address Jesse’s ongoing challenging behavior will require a team approach that includes Mr. Malik and his assistant, the parents, and a behavior support specialist. The first step in the process will be to conduct a functional assessment. Knowing the function or purpose of Jesse’s behavior will be critical to identifying strategies for addressing it (Neilsen et al., 1999). Children’s behavior typically serves the purpose of getting something (e.g., toy, attention) or avoiding something (e.g., an activity they do not like, a child with whom they do not want to play). Strategies for addressing challenging behavior are more likely to be effective when the strategy is focused on the purpose of the child’s behavior. A behavior support plan can then be developed that focuses on preventing the challenging behavior, teaching new skills, and responding to the behavior in a way that supports the use of the new skills rather than the challenging behavior (Dunlap & Fox, 1996). It is beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the step-by-step approach to assessing the function of challenging behavior and developing behavior support plans. However, there are many sources that explain this process in detail (e.g., Blair, Fox, & Lentini, 2010; Dunlap & Fox, 2009; Fox & Clarke, 2006; Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002), which is the top level of the Teaching Pyramid.

Summary

As the Teaching Pyramid depicts, promoting children’s social emotional growth is grounded in the context of positive, supportive relationships between teachers and...
children, as well as with families and other professionals. Because children’s challenging behaviors often are associated with boredom, frustration, anxiety, or confusion, early childhood professionals must work to ensure that children know what is expected of them, what they need to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Classroom environments can be designed to minimize feelings of frustration and increase the likelihood that children are engaged in developmentally appropriate, meaningful activities. The phrase creating supportive environments refers to practices that promote children’s engagement and help them understand expectations and routines. Such environments decrease the likelihood that children will engage in challenging behavior. Creating a caring, cooperative, and responsive classroom community does not happen automatically. Teachers must have a “planful” approach and be intentional in the strategies they use. These practices provide the foundation of an effective, high-quality environment (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009; Sandall et al., 2005). This foundation is necessary for preventing challenging behavior and providing a context for addressing the needs of children whose challenging behavior is not responsive to these practices alone. Finally, to effectively address ongoing challenging behavior, teachers must assess the function of or reason behind the child’s behavior and develop an intervention plan that is matched to the purpose of the behavior. Implementing the practices associated with only a single level of the Teaching Pyramid is not likely to effectively address the range of challenging behaviors found in many early childhood classrooms; rather, it is the comprehensive, intentional implementation of all levels of the Teaching Pyramid that is needed to effectively address challenging behavior.

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You may reach Mary Louise Hemmeter by e-mail at ml.hemmeter@vanderbilt.edu.

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