

Turning Lemons into Lemonade



Some of the challenging behaviors that occur in early childhood programs have more to do with program expectations and routines than with the children. In fact, routines can trigger behavior in ways that teachers or caregivers might not expect. Let's explore four features of early childhood routines that create special challenges:

Making **rules** can be a wonderful behavior strategy, but when a rule does not make sense to the child or is not consistently implemented, it may cause more problems than it solves. Imagine a rule that "you have to drink your juice before you eat your food." This attempt to help the adult manage the group and serve the meal won't make sense to a child who is more hungry than thirsty. It does not allow for any individual preferences

or needs. What about a rule that says "you can't read books unless a teacher is present"? Clearly this rule is designed to protect books from rough treatment, but it also limits children's play. This type of rule serves to totally change the way children learn to interact with books.

Privacy is important for children as well as adults. Many programs build in time for large and small group activities but do not dedicate time for private play, such as a minute or two *alone* reading a book, painting after other children have finished, or playing with an intriguing new toy. Privacy also includes providing children with a "safe" space for their possessions. Even sharing a cubby can be troublesome; some children crave a private space for their things. Imagine how you would feel if your creation were destroyed by the person sharing your cubby.

An early childhood environment should allow each child to feel that he or she has **enough**: enough time to play, enough toys to play with, enough room to move, and enough attention from caring adults. Thirty-five blocks may be plenty for one child to play with, but a group of children will be frustrated with not having enough for everyone. Equally important to having enough toys and materials is ensuring that there is enough room for children to move and play. Observe the children in your program to see the kind of space they need for the play they enjoy most. Children who are especially active, for example, may need a large area to ride tricycles or build towers with cardboard boxes. Without space to move, children will often engage in less appropriate ways to meet their needs.

Waiting is a special challenge because it is sometimes necessary. Unless you have as many toilets as you have children, someone is undoubtedly going to have to wait for a turn. Too much waiting time and waiting time that is not handled carefully can be stressful for young children, who are likely to push or shove to express their frustration. Allowing each child to go to the bathroom when needed is a simple solution. Rather than asking children to wait until everyone has their coats on, one teacher could take the first few children outside as soon as they are ready. Or children who need more help with their coats could begin sooner so that everyone is ready at the same time.

It is important that the environment include child-centered rules and routines. When children feel stressed or rushed or do not have enough time to do activities they enjoy, the result can be disastrous. Challenging behaviors like aggressive play, biting, pushing, and shoving are clear messages that more needs to be done to create an environment that supports the child. Before you consider strategies to *stop* these behaviors, look carefully at the structure of your program to see if there is a positive way to *prevent* these behaviors. Because behavior is one of the ways a young child communicates, challenging behavior may actually be a child's way of saying the environment does not meet his or her needs.

Try It Out

Next time a challenge occurs with children in your group, take time to reflect on yourself. Ask yourself the following questions, seriously consider your answers, and try out the simple suggestions.

- ✘ Are my expectations for the children reasonable? Remind yourself about the "age and stage" of each child in the group, and adjust your expectations accordingly. Can this kind of play continue because it is safe and appropriate for these children or do you need to redirect?
- ✘ How am I feeling? Could a recent cold or hunger be influencing my reactions? Am I less responsive to the children today than I usually am? Relax the day schedule for one day or grab a snack to meet your needs for the moment.
- ✘ How is my emotional well-being? Family, home, and "on the job" issues can impact how you respond to children. Try to stay in touch with your emotions, take a deep breath, and get through a challenging day as gracefully as possible. If the issue is a reoccurring one, seek support.
- ✘ Have I been giving inconsistent messages to children by ignoring this behavior one time and reacting to it the next? Make a clear and informed decision, communicate your expectations to the children, and stick with it.
- ✘ Has my attention been distracted by an adult conversation or other activities? Turn your focus back to the group. Get down to their level, make eye contact, and let them know that you are with them again.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *Our program discourages children from bringing toys from home. This rule was made because the toys were often lost and some children did not want to share their toys. Lately children are bringing toys anyway and having tantrums when we ask them to put them away. One parent is even asking if her child could bring a favorite toy to school due to special circumstances. Should we bend the rule?*

ANSWER: The rule you describe is a common in early childhood settings for good reasons. It is understandable that you would want to protect children's toys from getting lost or broken while at school, and it is certainly frustrating when children bring a fun toy but won't let anyone else play with it.

It may be helpful to think about program rules from a child's perspective. While we might think the "no home toys" rule makes getting along easier for children, bringing something from home can be a way of blending together different parts of a child's world. Some children bring a toy to show the other kids, almost like sharing with family members. A child who is attached to a particular toy is likely to be more comfortable in school if he is allowed to have it with him. A rule against bringing toys from home may interfere with a child's way of building the connection between home and school.

To specifically answer your question about bending the rules, however, the answer is absolutely not! Do not let

yourself get in the position of bending rules. If you are inconsistent, no one will know for sure what the rule is. If a rule doesn't work, change the rule.

For example, you may want to explain that toys from home are welcome but that children are responsible for keeping track of what they bring. It will be important that each child have a cubby or box or some special place to "protect" the toy when it is not being played with. You may also want to make sure there is a private play area if the child wants to enjoy the toy alone. You can use these toys from home as a way to learn more about the child and the child's play preferences. If conflicts arise, it will be a perfect opportunity to teach--and help children practice--problem-solving skills.

