

Child Care plus ✦

+ 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, and 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 and changes the way they 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 for some children who crave a private space for their things. Imagine how you would feel if your creation were destroyed by the person sharing your cubby.

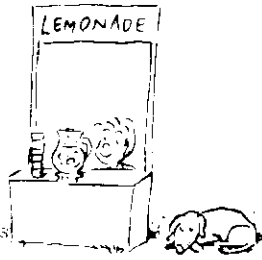
An early childhood environment should allow each child to feel that he or she has **enough**: enough time to play, enough toys to play with, enough room to move, and enough attention from caring adults. Thirty-five blocks may be plenty for one child to play with, but a group of children will be frustrated 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. +

SAM



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+ FROM THE SOURCE

Different Perspectives?

How can you collaborate productively with therapists and specialists on an individual child's behavior plan when you each may be coming from different perspectives? For example, specialists are responsible for meeting the needs of one child at a time and may focus on direct teaching and rewards to change a child's behavior. You, on the other hand, may focus on environmental issues that support or don't support the child's success. You might need assistance in changing the environment while a specialist is giving you strategies to change the child.

It will help to confer with specialists using elements from the NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practice which states that it is appropriate to "develop an individualized behavioral plan based on observations of possible environmental triggers and/or other factors associated with the behavior. This plan includes motivation and intervention strategies that assist and support the child to develop self-control and appropriate social behaviors."

These statements are a reminder that the early childhood environment is an ideal setting for fostering social relationships and playful development for each child only when interventions are planfully and meaningfully implemented with these points in mind +

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+ MAKING IT WORK

Self-Assessment

Next time a challenge occurs with your group, ask yourself:

✘ 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 cold or hunger be influencing my reactions? Am I less responsive to the children today than I usually am? Relax the day's schedule 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 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. +

SHW

+ NOTES FROM HOME

Using the Environment

Since January, I have been a helper in my son, Casey's, kindergarten class. Recently, the class has been into a construction theme. When I came in this morning, several children were constructing frames out of giant tinker toys and throwing sheets over them to make tents. At group time, the children talked about other things they needed for their "camp" and made plans to bring each item to school. Since we do this all the time, I didn't give the process much thought.

When the teacher and I were alone together, I told her that I had never seen the giant tinker toys in the classroom before, and I thought they were just what was needed to bring large construction into the classroom in a real way. I was especially pleased to see that Casey was even interested in being part of the construction "crew," instead of playing in the quiet area or reading books. The teacher told me that these same tinker toys had been available in the play area in September, and the children had mostly used them to make guns! She worked and worked to get the children to use the tinker toys in more positive play themes. She put up pictures of giant tinker toy creations. She made verbal suggestions to individual children. She even added smaller tinker toys she had put together in various arrangements to the area. While some children temporarily used these ideas, before very long they were drawn back into gun play. Her only solution seemed to be to completely remove the giant tinker toys from the classroom for a time, and that's what she did. When they started the construction theme, it only made sense to bring them out again and see what happened.

As I watched the children over the month, I never saw them go back to the gun play. I really appreciated the teacher's approach. She didn't blame me or Casey (oh yes, when I asked, she told me Casey was doing it, too) or any other parent or child for the children's making up gun play, she just took steps to make the play in her classroom more appropriate. +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Grace Lutheran Learning Center

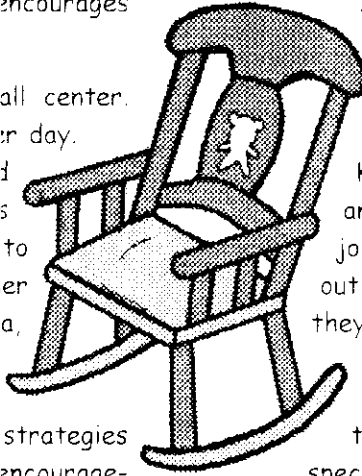
The early childhood profession recognizes the importance of consistency in everyday interactions with children. When children know what to expect and what is expected of them, they build a sense of security and take important steps in learning about appropriate behavior. One of the ways that Grace Lutheran Learning Center in Hamilton, Montana, maintains consistency is by adopting a facility-wide policy which encourages the use of positive guidance strategies.

Grace Lutheran Learning Center is a small center. Average attendance is 35 to 40 children per day. They serve children 2 to 12 years old, and offer full- or part-day child care, as well as preschool program activities for children 2 to 5 years old. Kathy (director/teacher) and her teachers (Debbie, Joan, Carolyn, Tina, Nora, and Lori) work very hard at creating a positive environment where all children have the chance to be successful. Positive guidance strategies that a visitor will often hear and see include encouragement, arranging the play space to support positive behaviors, and teaching problem-solving. Modeling positive guidance methods and talking about them with interested parents sometimes results in use of the similar strategies at home, further contributing to consistency for the children.

While studying positive guidance strategies, Kathy realized most teachers and parents spend too much time telling children what they are doing wrong. Her efforts to change this negative approach led to the program's using encouragement. With this strategy, teachers focus on children's positive efforts and initiate interactions that build the child's ability to appreciate his own efforts, accomplishments, and contributions.

Kathy also stresses the importance of designing the environment to be responsive to children's needs, interests, attitudes, and moods. The power of environmental design was clearly demonstrated earlier this year when a very simple change was made in the two to three year-olds' classroom. Two small rocking chairs had been placed in the corner near the bookshelves, facing out into the room. The children really liked to sit

in the rockers and see how fast they could rock—sometimes rocking so fast that they nearly tipped over backwards! Tina, the lead teacher, decided to turn the rockers toward the bookshelves, away from the center of the room. This simple change sent the children the clear message that these were "reading rockers" and directed their focus toward the bookshelves rather than toward the large portion of the room and the other children. Almost no rocking chair incidents have occurred since.



Kathy sees consistent use of positive guidance as an important milestone in the staff's journey away from the use of traditional time-out and toward helping children learn the skills they need to solve problems on their own. Children are encouraged to stop and think about their actions and possible consequences, and to work things out for themselves using specific problem-solving techniques. Not only are the older children wonderful role models for the younger ones, but they can often be heard offering suggestions and instructions.

Positive guidance strategies are shared with parents at every opportunity. Newsletters, informal conversations, posters on the facility walls, and facility-wide social activities all help create dialogue opportunities between parents and teachers.

The staff at Grace Lutheran Learning Center believe that the use of positive guidance strategies teaches children skills that will be helpful to them throughout their lives. Facility-wide use of these strategies sends the children consistent messages that clearly communicate what they can expect and what is expected of them. What a great way to learn about themselves and how they fit in this challenging world! + Lucy Marose

For more information about Grace Lutheran Learning Center, contact:

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+ What do I do when . . . ?

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 one 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 in child care 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! Don't 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. + SAM

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Guiding the Behavior of Young Children (\$10) describes practical strategies that support a nurturing and positive approach to guiding behavior. *My First Behavior Action Plan* (\$2) uses the strategies in a step-by-step approach to children with challenging behaviors. Send requests to Child Care plus+ Behavior, 634 Eddy Avenue, Missoula, MT 59812-6696.

15 TRAINING HOURS AVAILABLE

Child Care plus+ is offering a ten-week, self-study course: *Practical Strategies for Guiding the Behavior of Young Children*. Fees are: course - \$125; materials - \$50; and one academic credit (optional) - \$115. Each participant may choose a start date. To request an application, call 1-800-235-4122.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting childcare providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. *CHILD CARE plus+* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$5.00 per year (for 4 issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission, excepting illustrations.

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