



Caring for Children with *special needs*

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

As a child care provider, you spend time managing behavior. In a child care setting, you encourage behaviors that are appropriate and constructive and help children understand that some behaviors are not appropriate. There are strategies that work in child care settings that can help with those behaviors that are most challenging.

You manage behavior every day. When a child has a temper tantrum, you have handled it. Even though you probably haven't written it down, the way you handled a tantrum is your "behavior management plan." This publication looks at some of the more common challenging behaviors that caregivers face, and suggests management strategies.

Destructive or disruptive behavior

Richie is at it again. He has kicked over another child's block bridge. Yesterday he tossed around books so that the reading corner looked like a tornado had passed through. He has disrupted circle time by making faces and inappropriate noises. You are at your wit's end.

Does this child sound familiar? Probably every child care program has had a child like Richie at one time or another. There is an endless list of disruptive behaviors. It's likely Richie has learned that disrupting circle time guarantees attention from adults who are important to him. Children who show disruptive or destructive behaviors are learning them. They may have low self-esteem and believe this is the only way they can get attention.

Does Richie feel that if he's good, nobody will pay attention to him? Is this true? Interestingly, research done as far back as 1983 by Dr. Philip Strain showed that children with low "social adjustment" received seven times more attention from teachers for inappropriate behavior than for appropriate behavior. Observe yourself and your staff. When does Richie get attention from adults? Does he get more attention when he is being disruptive or destructive than when he is being good?

What does this tell us? Give attention to a child when he or she is behaving appropriately. Catch the child being good!

Often, staff will say that a child like Richie is already getting a lot of attention—even an "unfair" amount of attention—compared to the other children. Why, they ask, should they be asked to give even more attention to him? And besides, they add, Richie *never* does

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anything good (or the right way), so how can they pay attention to him when he's being good? Ask a staff person (or ask yourself) to make "scheduled" observations of Richie. You are likely to be surprised at how much of the time Richie behaves well, and you may be surprised to notice that at those times he is, in fact, not getting any attention from adults.

Strategies for inclusion

Give Richie positive feedback and praise for positive behavior. Seek out and underscore his success as much as possible. Look over some of the positive techniques that are used with children who have attention deficit disorders. Many of these strategies work well with children who are disruptive.

This is not to suggest that you should ignore or permit disruptive or destructive behavior that damages toys or interferes with other children's activities. Sometimes simple, positive redirection works best. For example, "Paint on the paper." If Richie disregards this subtle cue, make a firmer statement that includes the limits as well as the expectations: "I cannot let you paint on the chair. The paintbrushes stay at the easel." If Richie continues the behavior, remove either the material or the child (depending on the situation). If necessary, time-out is the final strategy to stop the disruptive behavior or to reinforce the adult's statement: "I cannot let you ..."

Noncompliant behavior

Emily has just been asked to pick up the blocks she has been playing with. Instead, she has said, "No, you do it" and has started to look at a picture book that had caught her attention.

This behavior is fairly typical of many young children. It shows how they may ignore an adult's request or refuse to do what is asked. This behavior is a problem only when it becomes the child's usual way of responding to adults. Just as was suggested with Richie, the first step would be to observe the child. When is Emily noncompliant? What things seem to trigger her noncompliance? Consult with Emily's parents and therapists or resource professionals who are working with Emily and her family.

Strategies for inclusion

Here are other tips to help you deal with noncompliant behavior:

- Identify trouble spots and plan ways to handle the situation before a problem develops.
- Give children ample warning before bringing an activity to an end and provide a clue about what comes next.
- Make directions clear, brief, and simple. For example, don't combine three or four instructions in the same breath. Give directions one or two at a time.
- Offer opportunities to make simple choices, such as: "Would you rather pick up the blocks on the floor or those on the table?" Choices need to be realistic. For example, saying: "Would you like to pick up the blocks or have a snack?" is not a real choice. Better to say (once earlier warnings have been given), "Time to pick up blocks, it's snack time."
- Focus the child's attention by saying the child's name first. Kneel down and speak directly face-to-face.
- Check comprehension by asking a question, such as: "Where do the blocks go?"
- Give enough time to comply. Don't rush to give the instruction a second time until you see clearly that the child is not going to comply.
- Don't coax or nag, but don't let the child go on to another activity until there has been compliance.
- Be matter-of-fact, firm, and consistent. Be quietly confident of your authority. Make sure other adults are aware that Emily has to pick up her blocks before she starts a painting activity.
- Offer to help, if appropriate, saying: "As soon as you get started, I'll help you put those blocks away."

Aggressive behavior

Johnny has just pushed Robert off the swing. Robert is crying. Johnny is swinging happily. Is this aggressive behavior? Johnny's parents may not find this aggressive behavior noteworthy. Maybe Johnny has an older brother who is aggressive with him and his parents ignore it.

In a child care setting, safety must be the highest priority. Furthermore, every child in the program has rights. A child cannot be allowed to hurt other

children. Certainly, no child can be allowed to hurt other children repeatedly.

Young children with troublesome aggressive behaviors need individual behavior programs. This is not a simple undertaking, nor one to be undertaken lightly. Parents should be involved and resource specialists included, if possible. Staff from your school's special education team also may be able to help develop an appropriate program for this child.

Strategies for inclusion

Here are other tips to help you deal with aggressive behavior:

- Johnny needs more attention but it should never be given at the moment he is hurting another child. At another time, when a positive opportunity occurs for quiet conversation, Johnny can be encouraged to talk about and even rehearse what he might do "next time."
- Young children often behave aggressively because they feel left out or because they don't know acceptable ways to get into play. You can encourage Johnny to acquire necessary play and social skills. Offer positive and pleasant feedback when he shows appropriate behavior.
- If Johnny hurts another child, turn your full attention to the child who has been hurt. Johnny should not get adult attention at that time. It does not help for you to tell Johnny how much it hurts another child to be hit or pushed down. Johnny knows from previous incidents and from the other child's behavior.
- If Johnny is frequently and severely aggressive, he may need to be removed from the group each time he acts out. Time-out is a nonaggressive way to help Johnny learn that he absolutely cannot attack other children. If possible, a second adult should move Johnny to the time-out space so that one adult can calm the child who was hurt.
- Time-out must be agreed on by parents and resource specialists (if any are involved). Time-out should be brief. Johnny should be told, "I cannot let you hurt children" but no other attention should be paid to him at that time. When returning Johnny to the group, don't lecture or moralize. Help Johnny get started in a new activity and offer interested, frequent comments if Johnny plays successfully.

Technical references

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More information

This publication is part of a series, Caring for Children with Special Needs. You may find other fact sheets in this series with helpful information. For the most current update of these fact sheets, check the National Network for Child Care website at: <http://www.nncc.org>

- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Feeling Comfortable (overview)-NNCC-98-06
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: The Americans with Disabilities Act-NNCC-98-07
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Allergies and Asthma-NNCC-98-08
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Attention Deficit Disorder-NNCC-98-09
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Challenging Behaviors-NNCC-98-10
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Chronic Illnesses-NNCC-98-11
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- Developmental Delays-NNCC-98-12
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Hearing Impairments-NNCC-98-13
- Caring for Children with Special Needs: HIV or AIDS-NNCC-98-14
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- Caring for Children with Special Needs: Visual Impairments)-NNCC-98-18



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<http://www.nncc.org>

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