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MANAGEMENT OF BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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Management of young children's behavior can be challenging for parents, teachers, clinicians, and service providers. When discussing the topic of behavior management, people automatically think of behavior problems. This has a specific message: there is a problem that has to get fixed. When children exhibit "behavior problems," the idea behind managing the behavior is to fix it, and often the child is expected to change. Our goal in this article is to re-define what behavior management means. Re-defining behavior management requires a broader perspective which includes consideration of the following: the child's developmental level, ways of solving problems and interacting with other people, and any risk factors impacting upon the child. Behavior management is a multifaceted process in which three aspects of the child need to be understood: the child's internal workings, external environment, and interactive influences guiding relationships. All of these factors need to be considered before a course of action can be selected to manage a child's behavior.

The first step of this process is to understand the children's internal workings, which includes their skill levels, developmental strengths and weaknesses, and individual styles. Prior to any intervention, be it as simple as saying "no!" or using actual consequences such as time out, one needs to determine the developmental level of the child. Is what the child is doing age appropriate, or developmentally appropriate, based on the level of cognitive functioning rather than chronological age? Are the expectations for the child age appropriate or unrealistic?

Before selecting an intervention strategy, another aspect of children's internal workings that needs to be understood is their approach to the world, individual style, or temperament. Temperament is the innate behavioral style of an individual. Characteristics to consider are activity level, ability to focus, involvement with people and activities, and ability to persevere. Thomas and Chess, the pioneers of this concept, identified three temperamental styles: easy, difficult, and slow-to-warm-up.

Similar labels that often have been given to identify different temperamental styles are flexible, fearful, and

feisty (California State Dept. of Education, 1990). The child who adjusts with minimal input and picks up on adult cues easily is characterized as adaptable, easy-going and flexible. The youngster who is anxious, apprehensive, and over-reacts in new situations or with changes is considered fearful. The boy or girl who has a higher than average activity level, is unable to attend, has strong and intense reactions, and tests all limits, can be described as feisty.

Once a child's internal workings are understood, more effective interventions can be provided. Consider the following situation: Johnny has a high activity level and is impulsive. Is Johnny a 2-year-old who is exploring by climbing or touching objects, a 4-year-old with cognitive limitations who is climbing to grab a toy, or a 4-year-old who has no developmental limitations but is wreaking havoc through climbing and touching objects? Although the behaviors may appear similar at first glance, the adult's response is tailored to the child's actual internal workings, which guides expectations and interventions. For the 2-year-old, close monitoring is warranted since climbing to explore is appropriate and a high activity level can be within normal expectations. As with the 2-year-old, the 4-year-old with cognitive limitations needs close monitoring with patience and redirection to help guide his behavior. The 4-year-old without cognitive limitations should first have a warning about his behavior and if he does not respond after five seconds, a repetition of the directive. If that does not work, a natural consequence should be used, such as restricting his playtime or choice of toys. As each child's understanding and ability to learn is different, so, too, should be the adult response.

Step two in the process of understanding behavior is to assess children's external world. This external world includes a variety of factors: their environment, their caretakers' physical and emotional state, and the positive influences or the negative stressors that impact their functioning. Negative stressors can include poverty, parental drug use, trauma, child abuse, and foster care. Children thrive in a stable, predictable environment with nurturing caretakers. However, when one of these factors is compromised, the likelihood that a child will demonstrate some kind of behavioral reaction greatly increases. For example, a child with a depressed mother may only get attention when he or she creates a stir, acts out, or misbehaves. What purpose does this behavior serve? Although the behavior is negative, it provides the child with a valuable tool for getting attention. Work

with the parent related to her depression and how she interacts with the child is optimal, but is not always feasible. Therefore, teaching this child a variety of positive ways for getting attention and substituting appropriate behaviors for those negative ones will likely reduce inappropriate behavior.

External influences have a powerful effect on the child's activity level, compliance, and social-emotional development. The child's environment and quality of physical care can help predict a child's success or lack of it. The security of consistent caregiving and predictability of care in the same environment will establish healthy attachments and also help dictate the nature of the child's interactions with others. If a child lacks this type of experience at home, or did not have it earlier in life, predictability and nurturing from those who work with the child can still have a positive impact.

Step three in the process of understanding behavior focuses on how interpersonal interactions and relationships are affected by internal abilities and external influences. Previously highlighted was the importance of understanding children's individual styles and temperament. Children's behavior elicits responses from those around them. Does the child create an angry or hostile feeling? Does the adult respond in that manner, or is the adult able to address the child using other kinds of strategies rather than just anger? How one responds or interacts with that particular child's style will have an impact on the ongoing relationship. The way a child's style interacts with the parent's style affects their relationship and leads to either "goodness of fit" or a breakdown in communication and behavior. Goodness of fit means that a caregiver provides the child with input that matches the child's development and temperamental style.

Once an assessment and/or review of the different aspects in the child's world are understood, the process of managing behavior can begin. Managing behavior consists of a number of strategies that are on a continuum. At the beginning of the continuum, basic behavioral tools are utilized. These include modeling, positive attention, rewards, purposeful ignoring, redirection and consequences. Modeling entails demonstrating the specific behavior you are seeking. Positive attention is actively attending to and praising the child's appropriate behavior. Rewards are used for reinforcing desired behaviors and could range from positive attention to gaining privileges. Purposeful ignoring is actively choosing not to react or attend to a problematic behavior that is not dangerous (choose your battles), while attending to and reinforcing desired, or close to desired behaviors. Redirection is shifting a child's interest to another acceptable activity.

Consequences should be reasonable and meaningful to the child, with natural consequences often the most effective way for teaching a child. For example, for a child who keeps throwing blocks, a natural consequence would be, "Let's put away the blocks, since you are having difficulty playing with them, and let's choose a

different toy." The consequence should be close in time to the action and ended within a reasonable amount of time. Generalizing the consequence to other misbehavior and extending consequences is not effective. Including children in the intervention process whenever possible, and asking them to help identify things they are working for, or allowing them to help choose the things that make sense to lose as a consequence, are effective strategies.

Certainly these techniques are not foolproof. There are pitfalls to avoid when managing or intervening with behavior problems: 1) adults losing control and also responding in a reactive manner; 2) providing unclear expectations; 3) poor follow through and/or variable, inconsistent responses; 4) excessive use of consequences such as time out; 5) frequent limit setting; and 6) power struggles (especially with oppositional children because it will exacerbate the problem.) Again, choose your battles.

Further along the continuum, interventions take on more complexity beyond the basic ones. Problematic behaviors range from those that are less noticeable, often identified as internalizing behavior problems, to behaviors that are very overt, identified as externalizing behavior problems. Many find that internalizing behaviors are easier to manage because they involve less conflict with other people, whereas externalizing behaviors are more challenging because they usually involve disruptive and aggressive behavior.

Internalizing behaviors include depression, anxiety, and/or trauma. When dealing with internalizing behavior problems, such as a withdrawn interactional style, fears, or phobias, the adult's approach is critical. Going too quickly, or pushing children to do something they fear, can create more anxiety for them. Children with the above presentation show a variety of responses which may be overlooked or misinterpreted. For instance, a fearful child refusing to do something might be wrongfully thought of as oppositional or uncooperative. Adults need to have a keen eye for detail. They need to understand children's responses so as not to misinterpret them. Adults can thus provide children with appropriate supports and, when needed, disciplining practices. Adults should be non-judgmental, flexible, consistent and appropriate when limit-setting. This means developing a repertoire of activities in order to provide the child with an outlet for self-expression and ways of mastering fears or traumatic events.

Another valuable skill needed by adults is the ability to explore the events or circumstances that can trigger inappropriate behavior. Knowing this can help clarify children's needs. For example, Sam is a 4-year-old boy who attends a neighborhood preschool program. Recently he began saying that he did not want to go to school. When his grandmother asked him about this he said, "I'm a bad boy, I get in trouble." This was unusual for him to be saying so his grandmother looked into what was going on at school. She learned that when he turned 4 years old, the school changed his class from the 3-year-old class to the 4-year-old class. Once in this new class he had difficulty with some of the activities

and was refusing to eat. As a result of some misbehavior he was getting time out regularly. On the surface Sam looks like a typical 4-year-old. However, his life changed dramatically after severe domestic violence which led to his moving in with his grandparents. He formed a good attachment to the teacher in his previous class and did not understand why he was suddenly pulled from it and placed in a different class. Since he had been traumatized, special consideration for this transition was needed to support his adjustment. The school was apprised of his reaction, and the staff developed a supportive plan for the transition that included spending time in the current class and entering the 4-year group part of the time.

When addressing externalizing behaviors such as disruptive or aggressive behavior, the adult needs to be firm, consistent, and quick to respond. It is important to set small attainable goals so that the both the child and the adult can feel successful. When working with a disruptive child, consider rearranging the environment to minimize opportunities for the child to misbehave. When misbehavior occurs and a consequence is enforced, evaluate whether the consequence reduces or increases the behavior.

The following example illustrates this issue. Joe is a child who is disruptive in his classroom. Each day when he misbehaves he is sent to the school counselor. There she tries calming him in a one-to-one setting. When Joe is asked what part of the day he likes best he responds that he likes going to the counselor's office. In this case the consequence winds up being reinforcing for Joe so that his behavior does not change and may even become more problematic. Instead, allowing Joe to go the counselor's office early in the day (before he misbehaves) and then telling Joe he can go to the counselor's office again later after he demonstrates the specific desired behavior would alter the ongoing cycle of misbehavior. This strategy targets the desired behaviors and reinforces them with an activity the child has indicated is important to him, so he is likely to be motivated to reach his goal. It also insures that when dealing with a problem behavior the solution does not contribute to the problem.

Managing young children's behavior can be very challenging. Looking for supports is encouraged and can yield many benefits. In early childhood settings, it is advisable to start by using available staff to problem solve and build peer support. Include and consult with the children's families, who are experts on their children, to better understand the children's needs. Seek referrals for consultations, evaluation, and treatment when appropriate. In a few cases preventative or protective measures may be warranted.

Managing young children's behavior has been identified as a process, which includes understanding various aspects of the child as well as strategies that help shift the child's and the adult's behavior patterns. Trying to understand the nature of a child's behavior problem, recognizing that behavior will change as the child matures, using available resources, and changing

approaches when ideas do not work, can ensure success in managing difficult behavior.

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