

Helping Children Who Use Challenging Behaviors

Section 1: Understanding Challenging Behaviors

What Are Challenging Behaviors?

Challenging behaviors are actions that adults observe the child engaging in that:

- interfere with a child's learning and/or development
- are harmful to the child, other children, or adults
- put a child at high risk for later social problems or school failure¹

Throughout this chapter, and this guide, we use the term *challenging behavior* in reference to the behaviors that fit the definition stated above.

The Behavioral Concerns Scale on the DECA-P2

The DECA-P2 is unique in that it is both an assessment of within-child protective factors and a screener for challenging behaviors.

The 11 items on the Behavioral Concerns scale are as follows:

- seem sad or unemotional at a happy occasion
- touch children or adults in a way that you thought was inappropriate
- have temper tantrums
- seem uninterested in other children or adults
- use obscene gestures or offensive language



- destroy or damage property
- have a short attention span (difficulty concentrating)
- fight with other children
- become upset or cry easily
- hurt others with actions or words
- get easily distracted

The Behavioral Concerns scale is designed to be used as a screening tool for challenging behaviors. Screening tools² are used to identify children who may need more comprehensive assessment. A screening tool does not identify the specific kinds of behavioral issues a child is having, but it does alert you that the child may be experiencing difficulty in this area.



The 11 items on the Behavioral Concerns scale measure a wide variety of challenging behaviors. The behaviors included on this scale are typical of children who have problems with aggression, withdrawal, lack of focus/attention, and controlling extreme emotions. These behaviors represent both externalizing and internalizing behaviors. *Externalizing behaviors* are actions that are outward expressions of a challenging behavior (such as hitting, biting, kicking). *Internalizing behaviors* are actions that are directed inward (such as hiding, refusing to speak, appearing sad or depressed).

Children who have known emotional and behavioral problems, such as children in therapeutic preschools, tend to receive high scores on this scale.

Keep in mind, however, that some of these behaviors (for example, temper tantrums) may be developmentally appropriate for some children at certain developmental stages. The behaviors become challenging when they interfere with a child's development and learning or harm self or others.

The results of the Behavioral Concerns scale, along with other sources of information about the child's behavior, are used by teachers and families to plan strategies. When a child's behaviors are severe or the behaviors are not improving in response to planned use of specific strategies, the child may need additional assessment and support from qualified professionals.

Why Do Children Use Challenging Behavior?

Most children find positive, healthy ways to get their needs met. There are times, however, when a child may use less positive ways. Often, the reasons behind a child's use of challenging behaviors are to

- gain/get something she wants or needs, such as a toy or object, sensory stimulation, or attention
- avoid/escape something she doesn't want to do such as an activity, a place, or an interaction with another child or adult

Most behaviors address one or both of these needs. These behaviors are referred to as learned behaviors. Learned behaviors develop over time because the child learns that this response generally helps him meet his need (such as obtaining something or avoiding something).

A child's use of challenging behaviors may be complicated by the presence of risk factors such as a temperament that is difficult to understand, prenatal or birth complications, or living in poverty. Children might lack protective factors, such as having an adult who loves them unconditionally, being of above average intelligence, and experiencing a quality learning environment.³ Children are more likely to be happy and successful when they have opportunities to develop healthy protective factors. This is because the positive influences in their lives help buffer the negative.⁴

DCRC suggests a strength-based approach (outlined in Chapter 9 and continuing later in this chapter) to help children who use challenging behaviors find more positive ways to communicate with others and get their needs met. When children have risk factors complicating their use of challenging behaviors, you may need to seek additional assistance. If a child's behavior ever poses harm to himself or others, you should immediately put a safety plan in place (to help keep the child, his/her peers, and the adults in the setting safe) and seek the help of qualified professionals.⁵



Preventing Challenging Behavior

Using effective teaching practices is one of the best ways to promote strong protective factors and help prevent challenging behaviors. Consider the following:

If the children in a classroom are engaged with interesting activities and materials that are appropriate for their developmental levels, they will be less likely to engage in challenging behaviors. On the other hand, if the activities and materials are too difficult or too easy, challenging behavior is more likely to occur.

The Devereux Reflective Checklist for Teaching Practices (found in Appendix B and on at www.CenterForResilientChildren.org) is key to promotion and prevention efforts. Use the Reflective Checklists early in the year and ongoing to continually enhance and improve social and emotional teaching practices. For more information use of the Reflective Checklist, visit Part II of this book.

When to Create a Targeted Plan to Address Challenging Behavior

In Chapter 9, you learned about creating a targeted plan to address a child's low protective factors (Child Strengths, Goals, Strategies Plan). This section takes you through the process of creating a targeted plan to address behavioral concerns. A targeted plan to address challenging behaviors is a written, systematic approach to help a child replace challenging behaviors with more positive ways of getting her needs met (Positive Guidance Plan). Teachers and family members write a targeted plan to address challenging behaviors if the child's challenging behaviors:

- are not reduced or eliminated through use of strategies to build strong protective factors
- become more frequent or intense (worsen)

When faced with one or more of the above situations, teachers and families will decide together the next steps to best help the child. At times, next steps may involve additional professionals being invited to observe or provide resources and services for the child and family. Next steps may also involve the teacher and families working

together to create and implement a targeted plan. We offer a process to shape these targeted plans, called Positive Guidance Planning.

Prior to planning, many families may appreciate having a list of the types of questions that will be discussed at the planning meeting. Encourage them to bring their own questions to the meeting as well. The form, Team Planning Meeting Reflection Questions (see Appendix B or www.CenterForResilientChildren.org) is useful for helping families prepare. Send this form home prior to the meeting to allow families to reflect on their goals for their child. It will help families feel prepared and ease any worries they may have about the reasons for the meeting.

The Six Steps of Positive Guidance Planning

The purpose of Positive Guidance Planning is to help teachers and families, and other members of the planning team, choose and implement practices and strategies that reflect the child's strengths and meet her needs. The goal is to help the child replace challenging behaviors with more positive ways to get her needs met.

Teachers facilitate the development of social and emotional skills in children by using *positive guidance techniques*. Rather than focusing solely on reducing the challenging behavior, adults direct their efforts to teaching the child social, communication, and emotional regulation skills.⁶

In addition to creating a Child Strengths, Goals, Strategies Plan (see Chapters 3 and 9), teachers and families, and other invited members of the planning team, work together to create and implement a Positive Guidance Plan. The approach includes six steps adapted from established function-based behavioral support practices. While these six steps are suggested to create a targeted plan for a child with persistent challenging behaviors, the steps can be applied to help understand any child's use of a challenging behavior. The steps are as follows:

1. define the behavior
2. gather information about the child's use of the behavior
3. review and analyze information related to a child's use of the behavior

4. identify replacement behavior(s) and set goal(s)
5. develop and implement strategies
6. evaluate progress and adjust the plan as necessary

Information gained through all six steps will be captured on an optional form, the Positive Guidance Plan, shown in figure 10.1 (also see Appendix B or www.CenterForResilientChildren.org).

4. Develop Goals:

- What is the long-term goal for this child?

- What are 2-4 short-term objectives for this child that will help him/her make progress toward the long-term goal?

Positive Guidance Plan

Use this form in Step 4 to help a child use more positive ways of meeting a need.

Child: _____ Date: _____

Teachers/Classroom: _____

Members of the Planning Team: _____

Strengths of this child:

Protective Factor Building Goals, if applicable:

1. **Define the Behavior:** Use clear, objective wording (just what you see/hear). Avoid guessing WHY at this point.

2. **Gather Information:** What other information will you collect or have in your possession to review for this child?

3. **Form a "Best Guess" about the function of the behavior:** Of the main reasons for misbehavior (avoid/escape, obtain), which seems to be the case for this child? Remember, it can be more than one reason in some cases.

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FIGURE 10.1: Positive Guidance Plan

First, Define the Behavior

What behavior is the child exhibiting that needs to be reduced or eliminated? A Positive Guidance Plan begins with a clear, objective description of the challenging behavior. While a teacher or family member might comment, “It is obvious, she is out of control!” all adults might not understand exactly what is meant by this description. Instead, describe the behavior using words everyone can understand and agree upon. The more specific the behavior, the easier it is for adults to identify more appropriate replacement behaviors. Recall the observation guidelines in Chapter 3 (page 38)—written records of children’s behavior are most helpful in planning when they are accurate, objective, and complete.

Second, Gather Information

The next step is to collect information from multiple sources about when, where, for how long, and in what settings the behavior occurs. Information sources include:

- the family’s observations of the child’s behavior and activities at home
- samples of the child’s work (drawings, projects, or photographs of work)
- data from other screening tools or assessments
- observation recordings (written, audio, or videotaped)
- behavioral incident reports that document what happens when a child hurts another child or uses a behavior that interrupts or distracts the child or group from playing and learning

When a child uses challenging behaviors, it is helpful to gather information about what happened before the behavior, as the behavior took place, and as the incident ended. This is often referred to as capturing the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences, or ABC’s of behavior. DCRC provides the optional Behavioral Incident Report

shown in figure 10.2 (also see Appendix B or www.CenterForResilientChildren.org) that includes:

- child's name and date
- other children and adults involved (code other children's names for confidentiality)
- the setting, activity, and time of day of the incident
- what occurred before the challenging behavior that may have triggered it (these are often referred to as antecedents)
- influences that could affect a child's behavior such as illness or hunger (these are often referred to as setting factors/events)
- what the child did and said (the behaviors)
- how the incident ended (consequences or conclusion)
- best guess as to the reason the child used the challenging behavior

Marci's teachers gathered information to help inform planning. They used observations, assessment results, and behavioral incident reports, and talked with the family.

B. What happened during the incident (behaviors)?

What did the child do and say?	How did others respond?

Behavioral Incident Report

*Use this form in **Step 4** (and ongoing as needed) to document a child's use of challenging behaviors.*

Date: _____ Child: _____

Teacher Writing Report: _____ Behavior(s): _____

Time Started: _____ Time Ended: _____

A. What happened before the incident (antecedents)?

Setting:

Children/adults present (code names for confidentiality):

What were they doing/saying?

What *might* have triggered the behavior?

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FIGURE 10.2: Behavioral Incident Form

Third, Review and Analyze Information

This step helps narrow down the reasons behind a child’s challenging behavior. Review and analyze information gathered in Step 2, such as behavioral incident reports,

to look for patterns in behavior. These patterns may show the behavior occurs at specific times, on certain days, with particular children or adults, or as a result of other setting factors/events, risk factors, or antecedents (such as when a child did not get enough sleep, is hungry, or has an illness). You can then make your best guess about the reason behind or function of a challenging behavior. This information will be important as you meet with families to plan ways to support the child.

The team used the information gathered on Marci to come up with this best guess about the reason or function for her behavior: “Marci hits and pushes when she has to wait for a turn or a toy.”

Consider the examples in figure 10.3. For each of the behaviors listed, there are two possible reasons a child might use that behavior—one is to get/gain access to someone or something, and the other reason is to avoid/escape someone or something. ***What the child needs from teachers and family is related to the reasons behind the behavior, not the behavior itself.*** The strategies developed and implemented for the child in the fourth step of Positive Guidance Planning need to be directly related to the reason, or function, behind the behavior.

My Behavior	Possible Reasons I Might Be Using This Behavior (Function)	What I Might Need from My Teachers and Family
I repeatedly poked the children sitting next to me at circle time, and I didn't stop when the teacher asked me to.	I want attention from the other children.	Help me learn how and when to get positive attention from other children.
	Sitting at circle time isn't easy for me. I don't want to be here.	Provide more interesting activities that involve me more during circle, or help me find something else to do that is appropriate.
I called another child stupid.	I want to get the teacher's attention by using a hurtful word.	Help me learn more positive ways to get attention from adults.
	Someone said I was stupid. I don't want to think about myself that way.	Guide me to appropriate ways to express my frustration. Help me value my strengths and feel good about me.
When asked to clean up and move to the next activity, I refused to leave the sand table.	I want more time playing in the sand.	Provide more time for sensory play. Help me learn the schedule and participate in routines. Give transition warnings often, and to me personally, when play time is ending.
	I don't want to go to the next activity.	Get to know more about me to see why I don't want to go to the next activity. Is it too hard? Are there too many children? It is boring for me?
I hid under the table after lunch.	I want someone to notice me.	Notice me in many positive ways throughout the day, not just when I am hiding.
	I am feeling overwhelmed by the attention of my classmates and the teacher. I want to avoid spending time in a large group.	Help me find ways to interact in the classroom without being the center of attention, which is uncomfortable for me.
I pushed down the child using the shopping cart.	I want to use the shopping cart.	Help me learn how to take turns and use words or gestures to show I'd like a turn.
	I don't want to play with that child.	Help me kindly show others that I want to play alone.
I broke the crayons into pieces.	I would rather enjoy the feeling of snapping crayons than draw right now.	Provide appropriate things to "snap" like green beans, packing peanuts, or snaps on clothing.
	I want more crayons.	Provide enough materials for everyone doing the activity. Help me learn to take care of materials.

FIGURE 10.3: Understanding Children's Behavior

Fourth, Identify Replacement Behavior and Set Goals

At this point in planning, you have gathered enough information to plan ways to address the child's needs. The next task is to identify the replacement behavior—what you will help the child learn to do to get his needs met in place of the challenging behavior. A common example of a replacement behavior is learning to ask for a turn using words or gestures instead of hitting.

Once you've identified a replacement behavior, you can set goals based on the new behavior. Breaking a long-term goal into several short-term objectives is helpful for both the adults and the child. Most times, it is appropriate to share the child's expected replacement behavior with her. Use clear, positive, and simple language that the child will understand. Many teachers find it helpful to rehearse with another adult before talking directly with the child about the expected replacement behavior.

This simple statement, reinforced regularly by teachers and the family, usually works:

To obtain/avoid X (X is the reason behind the behavior)

Instead of doing Y (Y is the challenging behavior)

Try to do Z (Z is the replacement behavior)

Marci, to get (obtain) a turn or a toy, instead of hitting or pushing, please try to say, "May I have a turn?" or ask an adult for help.

When there are short-term objectives, the teachers and family can observe and record progress along the way. As she meets or masters short-term objectives, the child can feel successful as she works toward the long-term goal.

Replacement behavior: *Instead of hitting and pushing, Marci will use appropriate words such as “I want a turn” or “Can I please play?” or “I’m getting frustrated” to express her frustration or show she would like a turn or a toy.*

Long-term goals: *Marci will learn to handle her frustration and express it appropriately. She will learn to ask for a toy or turn.*

Short-term objectives:

1. *Marci will stop pushing and hitting.*
2. *Marci will learn to identify when she is frustrated.*
3. *Marci will learn words (such as, “I’m frustrated.” “I’m getting upset.” “Can you help me?”) to use when she is frustrated.*
4. *Marci will learn words (such as, “May I have a turn?” “Can I play with that toy next?” “Can we share?”) to use when she would like a turn or a toy.*
5. *When Marci needs to wait for a turn or a toy, she will learn to find something appropriate to do while she waits.*
6. *Marci will use her positive words one out of two times when she is frustrated and/or wants a turn or a toy.*
7. *Marci will almost always apply her positive words and actions when she is frustrated and/or wants a turn or a toy.*

Fifth, Develop and Implement Strategies

Strategies are the actions you will take to help a child use her replacement behaviors and meet her goals. Chapter 9, section 2, outlines many helpful strategies that promote children’s social and emotional skills and help them build protective factors. In addition to the information in Chapter 9, DCRC keeps an updated list of resources to help children

who use challenging behaviors on our website. Visit www.CenterForResilientChildren.org and search “challenging behaviors” for more information.

To develop and implement strategies, discuss and plan for the following:

- How will the child’s unique characteristics (culture and language, strengths, interests, abilities, family beliefs) be reflected in the plan?
- What strategies will we try?
- Will these same strategies work for the family?
- Will the family need extra support to implement the strategies (i.e., modeling)?
- How are we including the child’s strategies in our daily plans?
- How will we respond to and reinforce the child’s use of the replacement behavior?
- How will we record progress?
- How will we keep in touch about how the child is doing?
- How will we evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts?

Many of the strategies in Chapter 9 would help Marci learn more positive behaviors. Her planning team might choose an individualized reminder system to help her recognize when she uses a replacement behavior instead of hitting and pushing. Or the team might try FLIP IT!® to identify her feelings with her, discuss the limit, and use inquiries and prompts to help her problem-solve. The team will choose strategies based on all the information they have gathered about Marci, incorporating her strengths into the plan.

When implementing strategies, it is important to be:

- **Caring**—Your relationship with the child is at the center of your approach. In order for the child to respond to the planned strategies, she needs to believe you care about her, and she needs to trust you. Continue to work

on your positive relationship with the child throughout this planning and implementation process.

- **Consistent**—Use the strategy in similar ways each time. Teachers, family members, and others involved with the child need to be clear on how to implement the strategies. The child will need all caring adults in her life to be on the same page about what they are doing to help her learn more positive ways of getting her needs met.
- **Patient**—Positive changes in behavior take time. In fact, when adults are trying a new strategy with a child, they will often see an increase in the intensity or frequency of a challenging behavior. The child has been using the challenging behavior because it has been working to help meet a need. She may try even harder to get the same results she has had in the past.

Over time, if adults are caring, consistent, and patient, the child will learn more positive ways to get a need met. After several weeks of implementing the plan, the team meets again to discuss the effectiveness of the strategies.

Sixth, Evaluate Progress

Before the end of the planning meeting, set a date when the team will meet again to review progress. This date is typically 4–6 weeks after the plan is written.

At the follow-up meeting, several questions should be considered:

- Have we seen the challenging behavior decrease in frequency and/or intensity?
- Have we seen the replacement behavior used more often?
- What is working?
- What changes might be needed to make the plan more effective?

The team will review the plan, discuss progress, and determine whether the plan is effective or needs adjustments. Possible reasons a plan may not work are outlined in figure 10.4, along with suggested next steps.

Possible Reasons You Didn't See Improvement	Suggested Next Steps
The adults are experiencing difficulties with being caring, consistent, or patient.	Reasons for this need to be discussed. The adults decide how they can be more caring, consistent, or patient when implementing the strategies.
The reason behind or function of the behavior was not identified correctly.	Review new information about the behavior and revise your thinking about the reason or function behind the behavior.
The strategies selected are not working as is.	Determine if a simple adjustment to the existing strategy might be effective, or if a new strategy needs to be selected.
The child's needs cannot be completely addressed through the team's efforts and additional support is needed.	Consider referring the child for further assessment. Programs may have a system for doing this or they may find the DECA-C (clinical form) useful for this purpose. The child may need expanded supports offered through resources in their own community.

FIGURE 10.4: Making Adjustments When a Plan Is Not Working

Marci's teachers and family meet again to review her plan. They note what is working and what needs to be adjusted. They are pleased to see she is making improvements and using her replacement behaviors more often each week!