

A Message From the Editors

Challenging Behavior Redux

Challenging behavior means many things to many people. One helpful definition is “any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults” (Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children, 2011). This definition reminds us that challenging behavior is understood and interpreted by people. What is challenging for one person might not be for someone else. And what might be challenging one day—when we lack sleep, for example, or are experiencing car troubles—might not seem challenging the next. How we interpret challenging behavior also depends on our values, beliefs, and abilities to work well with others, including young children who are sorting out the nuances of social behavior. We also must consider our knowledge of child development and the key importance of relationships as we learn about the best ways to help children develop and learn positive social and emotional behaviors.

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and *Young Exceptional Children (YEC)* share recommended practices with the field of early childhood and early childhood special education. DEC and *YEC* also translate research-based practices into accessible formats for teachers, families, and others who work on behalf of young children with disabilities and other special needs. In 1999, the inaugural edition of the *YEC* Monograph series focused on challenging behavior. We knew that practitioners and families were eager to learn practical and effective strategies on this important topic. In the 15 years since, we have learned much about effective intervention strategies as well as ways to promote positive social development and to prevent challenging behavior from occurring or persisting. Nonetheless, ways to address challenging behavior continues to be among the most frequently requested training and professional development topics. This *YEC* Monograph provides readers with guidance for using research-based strategies in both classroom and home settings.

Research evidence surrounding multitiered systems of support is increasingly robust. In the area of social behavior, such systems build on a foundation of positive relationships and engaging environments to promote prosocial behaviors and prevent problem behaviors. We call this foundational level the primary tier. The next level, or secondary tier, involves teaching specific social skills—often embedded within everyday activities and routines. Finally, the tertiary tier involves individualized and intensive interventions for children whose problem behavior persists

even when high-quality environments, responsive relationships, and targeted interventions are in place. The articles in this monograph provide guidance for all levels. Readers will also find that some researchers have divided these tiers into finer gradations to better fit the varied learning environments of very young children and that some authors use slightly different terms for similar concepts. We are confident that the authors' definitions, descriptions, and vignettes bring clarity to the key points addressed in each article.

Research has increasingly focused on implementation science—that is, how to bridge the research-to-practice gap by ensuring that research-based interventions are performed as intended. Practitioners and researchers must work together to ensure that effective strategies are successful in the “real world.” One method that can help achieve this goal is coaching. An article on practice-based coaching as well as references to other coaching approaches and implementation guidance are found within this monograph, in addition to articles on specific intervention strategies and approaches.

We open this monograph with DEC's position statement on challenging behavior, which highlights the importance of early identification and early, effective, and comprehensive intervention for young children with challenging behavior. This is followed by an article by Fox, Lentini, and Binder that describes the Pyramid model, a multitiered framework of early childhood teaching practices to promote young children's social-emotional competence and address challenging behavior. The authors describe how to implement the model program-wide by creating an infrastructure to promote and prevent challenging behaviors so that all children receive the supports and learning opportunities they need.

Among universal or foundational supports are classroom practices that foster an accepting and responsive community in which all children feel a sense of belonging. In their article, Yu, Meyer, and Ostrosky discuss four strategies that early childhood teachers can use to help children understand and accept their peers who engage in problem behaviors. These are strategies that all teachers will find useful.

The use of visual supports is another strategy to prevent challenging behavior and teach alternative behaviors. Gauvreau and Schwartz explain a systematic process for planning for and using visual supports in early childhood classrooms and in the many activities that take place in these settings. Moving up to the tertiary level, Dunlap, Lee, and Strain detail the Prevent-Teach-Reinforce model. This evidence-based model, designed to address the most vexing and challenging behaviors, is both effective and practical. The authors provide readers with the rationale, research support, and guidance for using the approach.



POSITION STATEMENT

Identification of and Intervention with Challenging Behavior

August 2007

DEC strongly believes that the early identification of children with serious challenging behavior is critical to providing effective interventions that will decrease the likelihood of poor academic and social outcomes.

There is growing evidence that young children who engage in chronic problem behaviors proceed through a predictable course of ever-escalating challenging behaviors. These challenging behaviors can lead to both short- and long-term negative consequences for the child and family. It also has been well documented that social emotional competence during the early childhood years is predictive of positive social and school outcomes in elementary school and beyond. Children who can communicate their needs and emotions in appropriate ways, form relationships with peers and adults, solve social problems, and control their emotions are more likely to be successful in school. There is a critical need to identify children with challenging behavior early in order to increase the likelihood of school success and decrease the trajectory toward more severe social and academic problems.

In order to accurately identify children who exhibit challenging behavior, comprehensive assessment approaches are needed. First, screening and assessment should be conducted in a variety of settings in which young children spend time. Second, assessment approaches should be comprehensive and include observations of children in their natural environments. Third, parents and other family members should be integrally involved in the screening and assessment process. Fourth, a team-based process that includes input from family members and professionals from a variety of disciplines should be used. Finally, assessment approaches that can be used to develop effective interventions should be included and there should be a clear link between assessment information and intervention strategies.

DEC strongly believes that partnerships between families, service providers, and caregivers in which each family's unique strengths, concerns, and responsibilities are fully recognized are critical to the design and implementation of interventions to prevent and remediate challenging behavior and to support appropriate behavior.

Effective partnerships between early educators, families, and other team members can facilitate identification of the variables that trigger and maintain the challenging behavior, followed by development and implementation of interventions that support the use of more appropriate behaviors. Effective partnerships also focus on developing strategies that build on the strengths and effective practices of team members.

DEC acknowledges the central role that families play in evaluating and addressing challenging behavior. Families may be able to share information about strategies that have been tried in the past, how their child's behavior varies across settings, the impact of challenging behavior on the family, family goals for their child's behavior, and they can implement interventions in the home and other community or natural environments. The level and type of family involvement should be determined by the family, based on family priorities, rather than prescribed by professionals or programs.

All decisions regarding the identification and assessment of challenging behavior, potential interventions, and evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions must be made in accordance with the family through the Individualized Education Plan or Individualized Family Service Plan if the child has one; or if not, through some other team decision-making processes.



POSITION STATEMENT: Identification of and Intervention with Challenging Behavior

DEC strongly believes that there are effective intervention approaches that may be used to address challenging behavior and support the development of young children's social emotional competence and communication skills.

The range of interventions and supports that are effective in addressing challenging behavior can be conceptualized using the three-tiered public health model of prevention and intervention approaches. The first tier, universal practices, includes strategies designed to promote the development of communication skills, appropriate behaviors, and social competence in all children. Secondary tier interventions include the targeted instruction of social and emotional skills and effective communication skills for children who are at risk for social emotional delays or the development of challenging behavior.

At the tertiary level, individualized interventions, based on an understanding of the behavior in the context where it occurs, provide an effective approach to addressing concerns about challenging behaviors that are persistently used by a child. A functional assessment process should identify the triggers, maintaining consequences, and functions of the challenging behavior. The intervention plan then must be tailored to fit the unique circumstances of the child and the child's family, and should include strategies for teaching the child new skills in addition to problem behavior reduction and prevention strategies. The intervention plan should be designed for implementation by family members and/or early educators in all relevant environments.

In summary, DEC believes that families and early educators must work together to address challenging behavior. This will involve: a) employing comprehensive assessment approaches that include screening and identification of the triggers, maintaining consequences, and the function of behavior; b) implementing a variety of evidence-based strategies and services designed to prevent challenging behavior, to remediate chronic and intensive challenging behavior, and to teach and support social and emotional competence and appropriate communicative and adaptive behavior; and c) providing support to team members as they develop and implement intervention plans in natural environments.

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