

# We Are All in This Together: Supporting Children's Social Emotional Development and Addressing Challenging Behavior

by Mary Louise Hemmeter

*We do workshops on challenging behavior every year, and it is still our biggest problem!!*

Program Administrator

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*There are so many challenging behaviors in my classroom, I don't even know where to begin!*  
Teacher

*I can't deal with Emma's behavior any longer. Either she goes or I go!!*  
Teacher

To the director of an early childhood program, these quotes will sound familiar. Teachers report increasing numbers of children with challenging behavior and increasing frustration associated with dealing with challenging behavior in their classrooms. Early

childhood educators report challenging behavior as a primary training need (Buscemi, Bennett, Thomas, & Deluca, 1996; Hemmeter, Corso, & Cheatham, 2006) indicating that they do not feel prepared to deal with challenging behaviors. Further, a recent study found that children in early childhood programs were 6 times more likely to be expelled from preschool than children in K-12 (Gilliam, 2005).

Many families of children with challenging behaviors have experienced multiple changes in child care because of their child's behavior. While this is disruptive for families, it has even more serious consequences for children. For these children, consistency and continuity is critical to their long term outcomes. In order to build the capacity of programs to meet the needs of children with social emotional needs and challenging behaviors, an approach is needed that includes not only training and support for teachers but administrative supports and policies. In this article, we describe five important steps for building supports within programs to address the social emotional needs and challenging behaviors of all young children.

**Adopt a philosophy that focuses on ensuring all children will be successful in your program**

This requires that programs adopt a philosophy that includes the following: a) all children belong here and our job is to provide supports that each child needs to be successful, b) we will work with families as partners in supporting children's success, and c) as administrators, we will provide the supports teachers need to ensure the success of all children. By adopting this philosophy, the program leader is making a commitment to supporting teachers, children, and families. This philosophy means that the program does not ask a child to leave because of behavior and does not blame the teacher, the family, or the child for the behavior. Rather, the focus is on working collaboratively with families to ensure the child's success in the program. This philosophy also means that the program approaches behavior from the perspective of teaching and supporting appropriate behaviors rather than only reacting to inappropriate behaviors.

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Adopting a philosophy can be a complicated process that involves ensuring that staff members are committed to it and that it is shared with families in a meaningful way. This can be accomplished by:

- Working with a group that includes teachers, administrators, and families to write a philosophy statement;
- Getting input on the philosophy statement from staff and families through e-mails, surveys, or meetings;
- Sharing the philosophy statement with staff making clear the leader's commitment to having the philosophy drive program decisions and practices;
- Sharing the philosophy with families by including it in a handbook or materials given to new families, sending home flyers, and having family gatherings;
- As part of the interviewing process, sharing the philosophy with applicants and probing their understanding and acceptance of the philosophy. Figure 1 (see page 14) provides some sample statements that have been developed by programs.

**Develop program-wide expectations for children's behavior and be proactive about promoting the expectations and sharing the information with families**

Once a program has accepted the philosophy that all children can be successful, staff and families can work together to decide what it means to be successful. One way to do this is to develop expectations for children's

behaviors. These can be stated as specific "rules" such as "use soft touches, quiet voices, walking feet" or they can be stated more generally such as "be safe, be respectful, be a team player." One advantage to the latter is that the expectations are general enough to apply to a variety of settings including classrooms, other areas of the center, home, and community. Even very young children will learn these expectations if they are taught systematically and children are supported in using them in appropriate contexts. For example, children can learn that being a team player in the classroom means helping each other clean up, helping a friend when he is sad, and taking turns with toys.

The use of program-wide expectations can be effective for a variety of reasons. First, expectations reflect a positive approach to behavior. That is, instead of focusing on decreasing problem behavior, expectations help staff and families focus on teaching children what to do. Second, program-wide expectations provide a common language for all staff and families and help ensure that "everyone is on the same page" in terms of expectations for children's behavior. Children get similar messages about what is expected in different settings. This can be particularly helpful when children change classrooms or spend time with different providers. Third, if expectations are taught systematically, providers spend more time engaging with children around learning appropriate social behaviors and less time managing inappropriate and disruptive behavior. Finally, having program-wide expectations creates a positive climate for staff, families, and children. There are resources for ideas about how to teach expectations to young children (Fox & Harper-Lentini, 2006; Hemmeter, Fox, & Doubet, 2006).

The following list includes some guidelines for developing and

promoting program-wide expectations:

- A team including teachers, administrators, and family members can meet to develop expectations. This can be the same group that worked on the philosophy statement. The group can solicit input from other staff and families about suggestions for expectations. Families and teachers may be more likely to support the use of the expectations if they are actively involved in the development process.
- The team should identify what the expectations will look like in common areas of the center. For example, what does it mean to be respectful in the hallway? If some staff think that means children should be walking in a line, being quiet, and having their hands on their hips, and other staff think that children can be walking two by two, talking quietly and holding hands, then children are likely to get mixed messages. Thus, staff within a center should agree on what the expectations look like in common areas so they can provide consistent support and feedback to children. This ensures that children clearly learn and engage in expectations.
- The expectations should be shared with families. Some programs have "kick-off" events where staff, families, and children learn about the expectations together. The expectations can also be shared through newsletters, fliers, bulletin boards, refrigerator magnets, songs, take-home books, or family gatherings.
- Strategies for teaching the expectations should be developed. These strategies should include teaching the concept, modeling, discussing examples and non-examples, talking about the expectations during activities and routines, and acknowledging children who engage in the expectations.

## Ensure that environments are designed to promote children's social emotional development and prevent challenging behavior

To ensure the success of all children, programs must focus on *promotion* of social emotional development and *prevention* of challenging behavior. When effective practices for promotion and prevention are in place, there will be few children who need extra supports around their behavior.

One model for *promoting* social emotional development and *preventing* challenging behavior in early childhood settings is the *Teaching Pyramid* (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003) (see figure 2). The *Teaching Pyramid* is based on research on effective instruction for young children (National Research Council, 2001), promotion of children's social emotional competence (Guralnick & Neville, 1997; Webster-Stratton, 1999; Hyson, 2004), and effective approaches to behavior support (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002; Fox, Dunlap, & Powell, 2002).

The practices associated with the first three levels of the pyramid are focused on *promotion* and *prevention*. *Positive relationships* between adults and children provide a context for supporting children's social emotional development and addressing challenging behavior. In the context of supportive relationships, children develop a positive self-concept, confidence, and a sense of security that helps prevent challenging behavior (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). *Supportive environments* help children know what to do and what is expected of them by providing consistent and predictable routines, developmentally appropriate and engaging activities, and positive feedback about social skills and emotional competencies (Strain & Hemmeter, 1999). *Social emotional teaching strategies* are designed to teach children to persist at difficult tasks, communicate their emotions effectively, control their anger, and solve social prob-

### Figure 1: Program Philosophy Statements Related to Behavior

*Preschool children are not expected to behave as adults. Children must be taught how to treat each other just as they are taught other skills. Teaching staff use proactive approaches to help children develop skills in cooperation and caring.*

The design for developmentally appropriate guidance for young children within our classrooms is based on the following:

1. Children are in the process of learning acceptable behavior.
2. An effective guidance approach is preventative because it respects feelings while addressing behavior.
3. Adults seek to understand reasons for children's behavior.
4. A supportive relationship between an adult and a child is the most critical component of effective guidance.
5. Adults use forms of guidance and group management that help children learn self-control and responsiveness to the needs of others.
6. Adults model appropriate expressions of their feelings.
7. Adults make needed adjustments to a child's environment or schedule to meet his or her needs.

lems. When children have these skills, they are less likely to engage in problem behavior.

When these practices are implemented consistently and individualized to address children's unique needs, the majority of problem behavior can be prevented. Thus, it is important to ensure that these three levels of the pyramid are in place to reduce the number of children who will need individualized plans.

### Develop a plan for addressing the needs of children with ongoing, persistent challenging behavior

Even when the first three levels of the *Teaching Pyramid* are in place, a small number of children will continue to display challenging behavior. These children will need an individualized intervention plan that is based on an understanding of each child's behavior. A team that includes parents, teachers, an administrator, and a person with behavior support expertise should work

together to observe the child, analyze his/her behavior, and develop and implement the plan. The focus of this plan should be on identifying what supports are needed to help the child be successful in the specific setting where challenging behavior occurs. The plan should include strategies for preventing challenging behavior, teaching the child new skills he or she can use in place of the problem behavior (e.g., asking a teacher for help rather than throwing a toy out of frustration), and responding in a way that increases appropriate behavior and decreases inappropriate behaviors. For children whose behavior is persistent, there is not a "single" strategy that will work; rather, a comprehensive plan will be needed.

To support the philosophy that all children can be successful, the program leader should be aware of some common issues related to working with children with persistently challenging behavior.

- Individualized plans must be implemented consistently and for adequate periods of time to be effective.

■ Behavior often gets worse before it gets better; and when it gets worse, teachers are often tempted to stop implementing the plan. However, if the plan is implemented consistently, this increase in challenging behavior should not last long. It will be important to provide staff with support through this initial period when behavior is likely to get worse.

■ Just because behavior gets better does not mean the plan should be stopped. Often the behavior is better because of the plan being in place. Removing the plan may result in an increase in challenging behavior.

■ When a behavior specialist or mental health consultant is available, the teacher and consultant should work together to develop a plan for supporting the child in the classroom and home as well as to provide any individual therapy the child might need.

■ Program leaders should be aware of the extra time individualized plans will require on the part of the classroom staff. Extra support in the classroom and time to develop the plan and work with the team should be provided.

**Provide systematic training, coaching in the classroom, and other supports for teachers related to promoting social emotional development and addressing challenging behavior**

In order to support teachers in addressing children's social emotional development and challenging behavior, program leaders should develop a plan for systematic staff training, ongoing coaching in the classroom, and strategies for supporting and acknowledging teachers. In order to support teachers in using the practices associated with the *Teaching Pyramid*, the plan should include sequential training

events that correspond to each level of the pyramid with time between each training event for teachers to implement the practices and receive coaching related to using the practices.

Coaching can be provided in a variety of ways including in class observations by the director or a Resource and Referral agency staff, peer coaching, one on one discussions, and review of videotapes.

To help ensure that teachers continue to use the practices, program leaders should be intentional about providing positive feedback and acknowledgement to teachers around their use of the practices. Some strategies that can be used for acknowledging teachers' accomplishments include "Monday morning memos" that highlight examples of things teachers have done that have "really worked," time during staff meetings for recognizing successes, dropping by the classroom to observe the teacher during successful activities, personal notes, and bulletin boards where photos, vignettes, and other indicators of success can be displayed.

The critical elements of the training plan should be that the training is comprehensive and builds on the levels of the pyramid, teachers have structured opportunities to practice new skills and receive supportive feedback, and teachers are acknowledged for a job well done.

In addition, it is important that programs create processes for providing three types of assistance. The first type of assistance relates to "crisis" situations. Who does a teacher call when a child is totally out of control and the teacher needs help with the other children? This process should be well articulated and should result in immediate assistance. Over time, this assistance will be less necessary as teachers learn to implement the *Pyramid* practices. Second, programs should have a process for teachers to "problem solve" with others around everyday issues related to behavior. Third, programs

should have a well-articulated process for using a team to develop an individualized plan for addressing the needs of children with the most persistent problem behaviors.

### Summary and conclusions

While this article has outlined the steps that will be needed to build a program-wide plan for addressing social emotional development and challenging behavior, these steps can be adapted to meet the unique needs of your setting. For example, some programs might be able to do a full day of training related to each level of the pyramid, while other programs may only be able to do one-hour training sessions over lunch. Some programs will have a professional development person who can support teachers while other programs may have to use the director in combination with peer coaching. The important goal will be to figure out a way for your program to implement the key components of the model described above. The overall message is that in order to address the social emotional development and challenging behavior of young children, particularly in group care settings, a comprehensive program-wide plan will be needed. This plan must include not only training and support for teachers but also a program-wide commitment to ensuring that all children can be successful in your setting.

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