Reducing Challenging Behavior: Administrators as Agents of Change

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“Pre-school expulsion is NOT a child’s behavior.
It IS an adult decision.”

Walter Gilliam

States and school districts are increasingly prohibiting the suspension and expulsion of young children

This can happen only when:
• The people in charge believe in this goal and have the skills to develop and lead a team that supports it
• The educators have the skills to understand, prevent, and respond effectively to a child’s inappropriate behavior
It starts with the administration

Leaders must create an environment where:

• All children and families are welcome
• The entire staff believes that every child has the capacity to learn and behave appropriately
• The educators understand:
  • why children behave inappropriately
  • why they themselves respond to children’s challenging behavior in the way they do

Challenging behavior as the teacher’s problem

Making it impossible to achieve their goals & interferes with learning opportunities

Their Personal and Professional Boundaries

Child’s Behaviors

Not a diagnostic term
There may be no diagnosis
Need to survive period before diagnosis

Challenging behavior has consequences

• Interferes with children’s learning, development, and success at play
• Is harmful to the child, other children, or adults
• Puts a child at high risk for later social problems or school failure

• Timid and withdrawn behaviors also qualify as challenging
Why should he stay?

- Moral obligation – can’t give up on a child
- If you know what to do it’s possible to make it work
- Tells the teachers that they are competent
- The other children are positive role models
- **Will make teachers better teachers**
  - Gives the child a bad message:
    - he’s un-teachable
    - you don’t want him
- Where should he go?

It is not about power over others, but about empowerment

Promote a philosophy of staff ownership of the solution as well as the problem

- The staff believes you are there to support them
- You accept each teacher for who he/she is
- You provide opportunities for success
- Acknowledge each person’s unique contribution and personal/professional knowledge
- You help them meet their goals!
- Make sure that the staff is given opportunities to develop the skills they need
- Acknowledge the importance of everyone’s work and ideas and create a team that works together
Building a team

• Develop:
  – A common approach to discipline that the team has helped to shape and can support
  – Goals and procedures based on this approach
  – Rules and procedures that will encourage appropriate behavior and discourage inappropriate behavior

• Identify:
  – Individual strengths/skills that will help the team reach their goals
  – Concerns that may make it difficult to obtain their goals

• Ensure mutual accountability, trust, support and commitment

What teachers need to know

• They need to understand themselves

• They need to understand the child

• How to create an environment that prevents challenging behavior

• How to respond effectively when challenging behavior occurs

What children behave inappropriately

BECAUSE IT WORKS

• To obtain an object or attention
• To escape a task
• To change the level of stimulation
Prevention is the best intervention

It is the DIRECTOR’S role to help teachers redesign learning & teaching environments that create opportunities for all children to succeed and to increase appropriate behavior

- Changing the social climate
  - Changing levels of interactions with the children
  - Utilizing preventative pro-social skills curricula
- Changing the physical environment
- Changing the program

The need to create a caring culture

- A positive, caring, welcoming social climate facilitates belonging and learning
- The social climate tells everyone in the program which attitudes and behaviors are expected, accepted, and valued

The backbone of a caring social climate is the teacher’s warm, nurturing relationship with each child and their family

Being Positive!!!

Are the teachers:

- Giving children attention when they are engaged in appropriate behaviors?
- Do they:
  - Tell children what to do instead of what not to do?
  - Use goal-oriented language?
  - Appreciate what each child can do, not what they cannot do?
  - Recognize close approximations?
  - Ignore some behaviors?
  - Are they aware of what they are saying (content) and how they are saying it (non-verbal cues)?
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Does the program
Adapt for learning styles?
Offer a variety of materials?
Ensure there are many ways to participate?
Offer choices?

• Do the areas and centers have enough space and entry and exit?
• Are there areas to accommodate small group activities?
• Are play materials arranged so that the children can choose their own activities and supplies?
• Is there a place in the classroom where children can go for a break?

Reasons why educators resist change
• Decisions or requests that are sprung on teachers without notice
• Not knowing enough about the change
• Feeling that changes are being done to, rather than done by them
• Concerns that change will require them to question familiar (and comfortable) routines and habits
• Change implies that the former way of doing things was wrong
• Educators question their ability: Can I do it? How will I do it?
• Change in one area can disrupt other projects or activities, even ones outside of work
• Change often increases workloads
• Lack of information
Introducing change

• Start at a staff meeting
• Give everyone a chance to speak
• Meet individually with every staff member
• Ask open-ended questions
• Talk with your staff about:
  • Why change is necessary
  • Who is affected by the change
  • What skills are required to implement the change
  • What are the available resources
  • What modifications need to be made
  • The time frame
  • How the effectiveness of the change will be evaluated
  • what the center or school will look and feel like when you reach your goal

A fine balance

• Timing is important
• Determine whether your staff is ready for change
• Collect data to support the need for change
• The need must be real
• You need to:
  • Listen
  • Reassure
  • Be sure that everyone is involved in figuring out what exactly the change will be
  • Support
  • Do not micro-manage

Implementing the change

• Introduce changes in small steps
• Focus first on what is already working well
• Start with the changes with the biggest buy-in
• Identify skills, support, and resources
• Together, create an action plan
• Determine the long-term goal
• Follow up with several short-term goals
• Clarify each staff member’s role
• Find appropriate opportunities for professional learning
Professional development is important

• What do the teachers feel they need to learn?
• Know what is available in your area
• What are your options?
• What are the staff’s responsibilities after attending a professional development opportunity?
• What are your responsibilities?

You need to attend the workshops as well

Your role after PD

• Your ongoing support is essential
• Discus with your staff how they can implement their newly found knowledge
• Help each of educator to develop her own action plan
• Provide opportunities for them to practice their new skills
• Monitor their progress

Attending a conference or a full-day training is the beginning, not the end, of their learning

Being There

• How much time do you spend with the children?
• Does the staff feel that you know what’s happening?
• Find a role in the classroom
  • The more you’re there the more naturally people will act
  • Observe unobtrusively
  • Help the teacher notice, pay attention and reinforce when the child is behaving appropriately
• How does the educator respond when the child’s behavior becomes disruptive or aggressive?
**The director’s role**

Help the teachers to:
- Belive in the child’s ability to succeed
- Trust, respect, and care for the child
- Find the child’s strengths

Combating the child’s negative view of himself takes commitment, patience, and perseverance

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**Keep in mind**

- All teachers do not have the same behavioral expectations
- All programs do not require the same social and behavioral skills
- Consistency in feedback about behavior is often inconsistent because expectations differ from teacher to teacher
- The behavioral requirements of classrooms are quite different from those in the everyday world

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**Teacher responses vary widely in the degree of teacher control**

- Low-control methods - Guidance
- Medium control methods - Discipline
- High-control methods - Punishment
Let them know when they are on the right track

Effective encouragement is:

- Accurate
- Specific/descriptive
- Formative
- Meaningful
- Honest
- Delivered in a way that fits your style

Getting some extra help

- Adding a part time staff member
  - What would they want the person’s role to be
  - Are there any special times of the day when additional support would be most helpful
- Request a mental health or behavioral consultation or coach
  - To partner with teachers to build the their capacity to support children’s social and emotional development and prevent and reduce challenging behavior
  - check the regulations regarding the need to inform or request permission from the family
  - Should this be part of your registration policy?
- Is there a way to give the educator a break?

Engaging a mental health consultant

- Reduces challenging behavior
- Prevents suspension and expulsion
- Improves classroom climate
- Strengthens teacher-child interactions
- Enhances children’s social and emotional skills and positive behavior
- Boosts teachers’ confidence in their ability to address children’s needs and behavior
- Reduces staff stress, burnout, and turnover
- Improves communication between parents and teachers

Help the teacher understand the advice she is given and support her efforts to make some of the suggested changes.
When you work with young children, you work with their families as well…. [Koralek, Nemeth, & Kelly, 2019, p. 1]

• Decide who should request and attend the meeting
• Learn more about the child’s behavior at home
• Be specific
• If the family doesn’t speak English, ask them to bring an interpreter or allow you to find one

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Getting the family on board

• Try to see things from their point of view
  • They may be afraid there is something wrong with their child
• Promote a philosophy of family ownership of the solution
• Look for their strengths, competencies, and resources
  • What information do they have – is there a diagnosis
• Invite them to share their thoughts and concerns and past successes with their child
• Don’t judge or blame them
  • Check your feelings at the door
  • Define the behavior objectively
  • Listen carefully

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What if the family doesn’t agree?

• They may not be ready
• If the child is an only child, there may not be a lot of challenging behavior at home
• They may blame the teacher or another child
• They may feel that the teacher doesn’t recognize their efforts or understand their lives
• They may be afraid there’s something wrong with their child

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What about asking the family to get outside help?

• Your best hope of enlisting their support and cooperation is to be specific

• Be prepared with a list of options
  - local community clinics,
  - urgent care facilities,
  - low-cost mental health clinics, and
  - psychiatric emergency rooms

Summary

Effective leaders:
• Inspire a shared vision
• Enable others to act
• Provide their staff with the tools and methods they need to solve the problem
• Empower others and encourage them to be creative and to take initiative
• Serve as a positive role model

The people you work with need to trust you and have confidence in your skills and direction