



## Eight Quick Tips for Responding to Children's Difficult Behaviors

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Addressing children's misbehavior is always a popular topic among preschool teachers. The following article was first published in an earlier edition of the TSR! Beat, and is being reprinted for those who have joined the project since 2008!

In a typical Pre-K classroom, there are often one or more children who exhibit especially challenging behaviors. Typical behaviors may include the following:

- Not following group directions
- Difficulty keeping hands or feet to self during Circle Time
- Hitting or pushing other children
- Wandering around or interrupting other children's play rather than remaining constructively engaged in their own play

Having one or more children who show such behaviors can be frustrating, if not overwhelming, for teachers who are simultaneously responsible for leading the rest of the class. The good news is that there *are* effective strategies for managing these children's behaviors and helping them to build self-control, although the process may take some time and patience. If you have children with challenging behaviors in your class, the first step is to take some time to observe and make notes about each of those children. If possible, keep a notepad handy where you can jot down brief notes during the day as situations occur. Your mentor can also serve as the observer/note-taker while you are teaching. Try to notice the following:

- What *specific* problematic behaviors does the child exhibit?
- For each behavior, when does the behavior occur?
- What is happening just *before* the behavior occurs?
- What happens for the child *after* the behavior occurs? (Does she get what she wanted? Does he get to avoid a non-preferred activity? Does she get attention from children or teachers?)
- When are the child's *best* times of day? When is he/she behaving most appropriately?

These observations will help you figure out what to do next. Once you have observed the patterns of this child's behaviors, pick some of the following strategies to try:

- 1) Anticipate specific activities or times of day when the child often seems to act out. At those times, try to keep the child close to you by sitting him in your lap, holding his hand, or giving him a special helper task at that time. You will be close enough to give positive support such as a hug or a gentle reminder about behavior, and better able to intervene quickly if you need to. For more active times such as on the playground or during Center times, go check on the child frequently to see how things are going, rather than waiting until there is a problem. If a child is wandering aimlessly, help her find something constructive to do.
- 2) Make a commitment to praise the child every time you see her doing the right thing! Give *specific* praise that tells the child exactly what she is doing that is good (e.g., “Wow Elena, you are doing a great job putting the blocks away! Thank you for being such a good clean-up helper!” “Thank you Joseph for waiting so patiently for your turn to wash your hands, I’m very proud of you!” “Albert, you are sharing the sandbox so nicely with your friends today!”) Increasing the frequency and specificity of sincere praise can have a powerful effect, especially for children who crave attention and may act out to seek your attention.
- 3) Give the child very clear directions for what you want him to do at that moment. For example, instead of “Ramon, you need to behave yourself!”, try “Ramon, sit down on your carpet square and put your hands in your lap”. Instead of “Lauren, you better be cleaning up!”, try “Lauren, I see 3 more crayons still on the table. Please put the crayons into the crayon can.” In this way, the child is reminded of a specific task to do.
- 4) After you ask the child to do something, do not turn away from that child until you see that he has complied. If the child does what you asked right away, praise him immediately. If he does not, go over to the child, get down to his level, gain eye contact, and repeat your direction again. As soon as the child complies, praise immediately. In this way you follow through and let the child know that you mean what you say, and you are paying attention so you can reward the child right away with your praise for doing what was asked.
- 5) Teach children how to get what they want more effectively. If a child grabs toys from others, teach her how to ask for a turn instead, and be there to help her to do so. If a child is jumping up or making noises during Circle Time, use a “when-then” rule, such as “Alex, *when* you are sitting quietly, *then* I will call your name to go to Centers.”
- 6) Do not over-use “Time Out”. This kind of consequence should be reserved for times when the child is being aggressive and needs to be separated from other children for safety reasons, or when the child repeatedly refuses to do as you ask. After the Time Out, the child needs to go back and do what she was originally asked to do before moving on to the next activity.

- 7) Keep classroom routines and expectations predictable and consistent so children know what is expected of them. Children tend to behave better in a well-organized classroom.
- 8) Keep the pace of activities lively, so that children are not waiting around for long periods with nothing to do. Children who have shorter attention spans or are less mature will have more difficulty sitting still and waiting. Use songs, transition games, and your enthusiastic voice to get children's attention and encourage following directions.

Would you like more information related to this topic? Here are some helpful links!

"Helping Children Express Their Wants and Needs":

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/briefs/wwb19.pdf>

"Acknowledging Children's Positive Behaviors":

[http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/briefs/wwb\\_22.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/briefs/wwb_22.pdf)

"Five Ways to Set Limits":

[http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article\\_view.aspx?ArticleId=91](http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleId=91)

"Teaching Children to Share":

[http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article\\_view.aspx?ArticleId=176](http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleId=176)