# Setting Up Your Classroom to Prevent Challenging Behaviors

by Tara McLaughlin and Crystal Bishop

Children engage in behaviors adults find challenging for a variety of reasons. Challenging behaviors might include hitting, kicking, crying, shouting, or running away. In young children, these behaviors are not always a cause for serious concern and might be considered age-appropriate. As children mature and gain social-emotional competence, challenging behaviors often decrease.

As an early childhood teacher, there are many things you can do to prevent challenging behaviors and teach children skills to promote their social-emotional development. Current models to promote social-emotional competence and prevent challenging behavior emphasize core teaching strategies that focus on prevention, promotion, and, in the case of the persistent challenging behavior, intensive intervention (Brown, Odom, & Conroy, 2001; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Hemmeter, Fox, & Snyder, 2013; Webster-Stratton, 1999, 2011).

In this brief article we discuss some key strategies to promote children's active engagement and to prevent challenging behavior. These strategies include:

- setting up the classroom for success.
- planning dynamic activities.
- showing children how to play.

## Let's meet Miss Garcia

Miss Garcia has two part-time assistants and a group of 18 high-energy four-year-olds in her classroom. She feels like she is dealing with small problems and conflicts between children all day. Before activities begin she tries to remind children about the classroom rules and expectations, but she often finds herself following up with children after an incident has occurred. We join Miss Garcia and her class as music and movement ends and it's time for learning centers to begin. Music and movement is a very energizing activity with children jumping, dancing, and singing loudly along to songs they know well. When the activity ends, children are still energetic as they move among the different centers.

One little boy, Tim, starts out in the dress-up area playing with a group of girls pretending to be veterinarians. Tim is pretending to be a dog. He sees the easel in the art center and crawls under it to pretend it is his cage. He begins to bark and jump in his 'cage.' When he does this, he knocks over the easel and paint goes everywhere! Miss Garcia hurries over to clean up the paint with Tim.

At the same time, Miss Garcia notices Jemma and Sienna arguing at the computer. Jemma is playing on the computer and Sienna is waiting for a turn. Sienna leans over the desk watching Jemma play, repeatedly asking for her turn. Jemma says, "No! It's my turn now." Sienna pushes Jemma off the chair. Jemma stands up and starts shouting. Miss Garcia comes over to find out what's wrong. She reminds Sienna that she has to wait her turn, but Sienna wants to know when it will be her turn. Miss Garcia tells Jemma to finish her game and then it will be Sienna's turn.

Simon is crying at the modeling clay table. Simon tells Miss Garcia that Chase threw clay at him. Miss Garcia asks Chase why he threw his clay at Simon. He grumbles and says he didn't mean to and tells Simon he's sorry. He tells Miss Garcia he wanted to make a bug, but didn't have anything to make a bug with so he got mad. Miss Garcia tries to show him there are rollers, stampers, and a pair of scissors for him to use when a loud crash comes from block area.

The large block tower Liam and Rachel were making is in pieces all over the floor. Both Liam and Rachel are crying, and Tim has a big smile on his face. When Miss Garcia goes over to see what happened, Tim says he asked if he could play and they both said yes before he kicked over the tower. Miss Garcia starts to explain why Liam and Rachel are so upset.

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Clearly, Miss Garcia seems to have her hands full during center time, but she reports other times of the day are challenging as well. In order to support the children in her room to be more successful, Miss Garcia might want to consider:

- how the classroom set-up and activities help or hinder the children's engagement and behavior.

- what supports are in place to help the children know what to do at each learning center.

- what she might do *before* learning centers to help children be successful.

## Setting up the Classroom for Success

The physical layout of the classroom space and the flow of activities, routines, and transitions have a big impact on children's behavior (Lawry, Danko, & Strain, 2000; Strain & Hemmeter, 1997). When the environment and schedule are working for both children and adults, the day feels calm, smooth, and fun.

A schedule should be designed to:

- keep children active and engaged, without over- or under-stimulating them.

- provide a balance of structured and routine activities, as well as activities where children have freedom and choice.

- include time with small or large groups of peers and time for children to play on their own or with peers of their choosing.

The design of the classroom should allow children to move within and between activities comfortably. Learning areas need clearly defined boundaries so children know which activities occur in different areas and teachers are able to see children in all areas when scanning the room.

Reviewing the daily schedule and physical set-up of your program space is an important part of preventing challenging behaviors (Bangeree & Horn, 2013; Lawry, Danko, & Strain, 2000). To get more information about how her schedule and classroom space might be related to children's behaviors, Miss Garcia wrote out her daily schedule and classified the types of activities that occur during the day (active/quiet, large group/small group; see Table 1). She also made a classroom map (Figure 1). She used the schedule to record when challenging behavior occurred and will use the map to record where challenging behaviors occurs each day for a week.

## Table 1 — Schedule Review

| Daily Schedule | Is the activity active or passive? | How long does the activity last? | Does challenging behavior occur? | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arrival/Morning Activities | Active | 15-20 | No | |
| Breakfast in the room | Passive | 15-20 | No | |
| Morning Circle | Passive | 20 | Sometimes | If introducing a new topic, go 10-15 minutes longer |
| Music and Movement | Active | 20 | No | |
| Free Play | Active | 45-55 | Yes | At different times in different areas |
| Snack | Passive | 15-20 | Yes | Depends on snack options |
| Outside | Active | 45-55 | No | |
| Lunch | Passive | 30 | Sometimes | If no outside play |
| Nap/Quiet Time | Passive | 30 | No | |
| Story Time | Passive | 20 | No | |
| Group Activity | Passive | 20 | Yes | Children rolling on floor |
| Small Groups/Centers | Active | 40 | Sometimes | Depends on activities |
| Closing Circle | Passive | 15 | No | |
| Pack-up/Dismissal | Active | 10 | Sometimes | When rushed |

### Figure 1 — Classroom Map



Take a look at what she found. Based on what you see in Figure 1 and Table 1, what changes might you recommend?

When Miss Garcia looked at her schedule (Table 1 on previous page), she noticed that children have two high-energy activities in a row in the morning and several quiet activities in the afternoon. Mixing active and quiet activities might help keep children from getting over-stimulated in the morning and help them stay actively engaged in the afternoon. Miss Garcia considered how she might adjust her schedule to create a more balanced flow to the day.

When Miss Garcia looked at her classroom map (Figure 1 above), she noticed she has a very small area for dress-up, and a lot of challenging behavior happens in this area. She realized the dress-up area gets crowded and children start pushing and shoving. Children often move dress-up play into other areas, which occasionally causes problems.



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

She considered how she might make more room for dress-up and create some natural boundaries with furniture and other equipment that will help children stay in the area when they are playing in this area.

When challenging behavior occurs regularly at certain times or in certain areas, it might be helpful to consider changes to the schedule or the environment. To determine if your schedule and classroom space are designed to prevent challenging behavior, check out the *Tips for Setting up the Classroom for Success*. If you think you might need to make some changes, consider collecting more information to identify potential 'hot spots' — spots challenging behavior occurs regularly. When you identify a concern and make changes, remember to continue monitoring activities and areas to make sure the changes are working.

**Tips for Setting up the Classroom for Success**

- Establish a balanced schedule for daily activities

- Consider the length of activities (e.g., are children getting bored? Are children disappointed when they're told to stop in order to transition to another activity?)

- Establish a routine and follow it consistently; prepare children for changes

- Create clear boundaries for activity areas

- Avoid wide-open or long narrow spaces that encourage running indoors

- Limit the number of children who can play in an area if you have space restrictions

- Minimize obstacles and other hazards and ensure visibility

- Ensure equipment and materials are 'child-size' and accessible for children

## Planning Dynamic Activities

Designing dynamic activities that captivate children's interest and offer a balance of opportunities for play, language, emergent literacy, self-expression, exploration, interactions with peers, personal routines, and fine- and gross-motor activities supports children's engagement and learning. In addition, having a range of materials that support different types of engagement helps make activities more accessible to all children, supports ongoing involvement in a range of activities, and helps prevent challenging behavior (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso, 2011).

The *Tips for Planning Dynamic Activities* can be used to determine whether activities are designed to promote children's engagement. Doing an activity analysis is also a helpful way to examine classroom learning experiences (Snyder, Hemmeter, Sandall, McLean, & McLaughlin, 2013). To conduct an activity analysis, it is important to examine several features of the activities children experience in the classroom. These include: a) the purpose, b) the structure, c) the materials provided, d) how children engage, and e) what children experience during an activity. This information helps facilitate reflection about the design of the activities and what changes might be needed.

Miss Garcia conducted an activity analysis (see Table 2 on next page). We can see she that she reviewed the activities she has available for the children and considered how the design, materials, and expectations promote the children's engagement. She noted she might need to make some changes at the modeling clay table. In Table 2, we see clay is a daily activity in Miss Garcia's classroom. On most days, the set-up is the same, with a few pre-selected materials set out for children. Miss Garcia decides to vary the materials and incorporate fun themes to help engage the children in different ways and bring new experiences to their learning.

Miss Garcia also realized from the incident with Jemma and Sienna at the computer that it is not clear how children are expected to take turns at the computer. What changes might you recommend for this learning area?

Identifying patterns and reflecting on our activities in this way helps us consider what children experience in the environment and whether we are offering a full range of dynamic activities to engage them and contribute to their learning. To determine if your activities could use a refresher, check out the tips below and consider doing an activity analysis to inform how you might enhance your learning experiences.

**Tips for Planning Dynamic Activities**

■ Plan the intended learning outcomes for the activity, but be flexible when children take their learning in a different direction

■ Integrate a variety of skills as part of an activity

■ Build on children's interests and ideas

■ Be aware of timing (not too long or too short for children's attention)

■ Rotate relevant materials and themes to keep activities interesting

■ Allow children to have different ways of being or doing

■ Support children to be successful and challenged within activities (not too hard and not too easy)

## Showing Children How to Play

Sometimes children need information about how to play. It might be easy to assume that Tim kicked over the block tower to destroy his friend's creations, but it is important to consider this might be the only way he knows to play with the blocks; knocking down blocks is fun, makes a loud noise, and then you get to build the tower back up again. Tim might need some extra support to learn other fun things he could do with the blocks. This will not only help him stay engaged with the materials, but will help him have positive interactions with his peers.

Teachers can demonstrate play sequences to children or support children in gaining skills so they can participate more meaningfully in activities (Fox, & Lentini, 2006; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso, 2011). This might include playing with children and modeling different ways to play, giving ideas, and pointing out what peers are doing. For some children, this might include more specific information or visuals (see Figure 2 on next page). Giving children ideas about how they might use materials in their play can help expand their imagination.

To identify areas in which you might help a child learn to play, consider the different ways children could use the

## Table 2 — Activity Analysis

| Activity | Learning Purpose | How is the activity structured?* | What materials are available? | What do children need to know or be able to do to be engaged in the activity? | What do children do or experience in this activity? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blocks | Fine-motor Social Math | Unstructured Routine Socially-oriented and materially-oriented | Set materials (wooden blocks, cars, people figures) Occasionally bring out different block sets | Create and build Share with peers or work together (communicate) Examine shapes and structures | Some children know how to build and have ideas for building new things, but other children do the same thing each time. |
| Clay | Fine-motor | Structured (by materials) Routine Materials-oriented | Set materials (rollers/stampers) | Use hands to roll, kneed, or stamp different shapes | Use the stampers, rollers, scissors, and their hands to push, press, mash, and shape the clay. Some children often make figures or shapes and engage in pretend play with them. |
| Dress-Up | Imaginative Play Social Language | Unstructured Routine Socially-oriented | New materials and themes weekly | Create a pretend play sequence Communicate with peers | Get in costume. Some children play out different roles and scenarios in character, but some children put on their costumes and play their typical games. |
| Computer | Cognitive Fine-Motor Recreation | Unstructured (first come, first served) Novel (open 2-3 days a week) Materials-oriented | Set games 1 computer available | Access games Use mouse and keyboard Wait turns | If their turn, play until they are finished. Different children play different games; some longer, some shorter. If waiting, watch other child until their turn. |

*Structure refers to features of the activity that will affect what children do or how children experience the activity. These might include whether the activity is:
• Whole group, small group or individual
• Structured (children do the same thing) or unstructured (children do different things)
• Socially-oriented, materially-oriented, or both
• Teacher-directed or child-initiated
• Novel (new to the children) or routine (occurs everyday)

## Figure 2. "How to" Play Visuals





**Note:** Tips, Figures, and Tables reprinted with permission from the first author.

materials and engage in activities. Create visuals to help show children what to do, or spend time playing with children and model the different things they can do. As you show children how to play, be flexible, have fun, and build off children's interests and abilities. For example, Miss Garcia might show Tim how to build a garage for his favorite red sports car in the block area. Building on children's interests and helping them learn new ways to play can expand the skills children have to engage in appropriate play with materials and peers.

**Tips for Showing Children How to Play**

- Observe children in play activities to see what they do

- Build on children's interests and skills when considering new ideas

- Join children in play activities to support and extend their skills

- Offer encouragement when children try new activities and skills

## In Review

Challenging behavior can be very frustrating and stressful for early childhood teachers. The good news is that many challenging behaviors can be prevented when teachers use strategies that focus on prevention of challenging behavior and promotion of new skills as a first response:

- Set up the schedule and environment for success

- Design activities that promote active child engagement and learning

- Use observation and data collection to identify patterns, make changes as needed, and identify areas for teaching

- Focus on teaching children what to do

## References

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## For more ideas and resources check out:

Pyramid Model Consortium:
www.pyramidmodel.org/

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL):
http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/index.html

National Center for Quality Teaching and Learning:
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children:
www.challengingbehavior.org/index.htm