Building Relationships and Environments to Foster Positive Behavior in Prekindergarten:

A Resource and Reflection Tool

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Introduction

The early childhood years are full of new experiences, expectations, and opportunities to develop developmentally appropriate relationships.

Early childhood educators play a significant role in supporting the development of self-regulation skills with intentional instruction, support, and scaffolding.

Prekindergarten children are learning how to express their emotions, interact with others, and calm themselves. Helping children learn to manage their behavior, while still expressing their emotions and getting their needs met, is one of the more formidable responsibilities of early educators.

Most young children do not enter prekindergarten knowing what is expected of them and early educators may not be aware of their cultural and behavioral expectations at home. But each child brings his or her own set of culturally based scripts, skills, talents, and values into the classroom. This document aims to aid early educators in implementing positive, proactive, and preventative practices to better address a child's behavioral needs. It provides tips for building positive relationships and learning environments that promote self-regulation skill development in prekindergarten students.

There are areas to pause and reflect, take the time to jot down your ideas, share with a colleague and begin the process of making small changes to foster positive behavior in students. Additional materials such as Preschool Teacher Guidance for Challenging Behaviors, Webinars from the Office of Early Learning and Getting Started: Six Tips for Supporting Positive Behaviors are resources to be used in conjunction with this booklet.

As a reminder for OCFS licensed Pre-k programs, these documents should be used in conjunction with the written behavior management plan established as required by OCFS regulation 418-1.9.

> "So often children are punished for being human. Children are not allowed to have grumpy moods, bad days, disrespectful tones, or bad attitudes. Yet, us adults have them all the time. None of us are perfect. We must stop holding our children to a higher standard of perfection than we can attain ourselves." - Rebecca Eanes
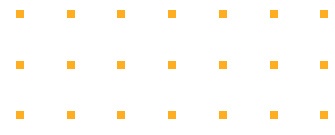
Before We Begin...

What goals do you have for your students?

What success have you had in reaching these goals?

What barriers do you find in reaching these goals?

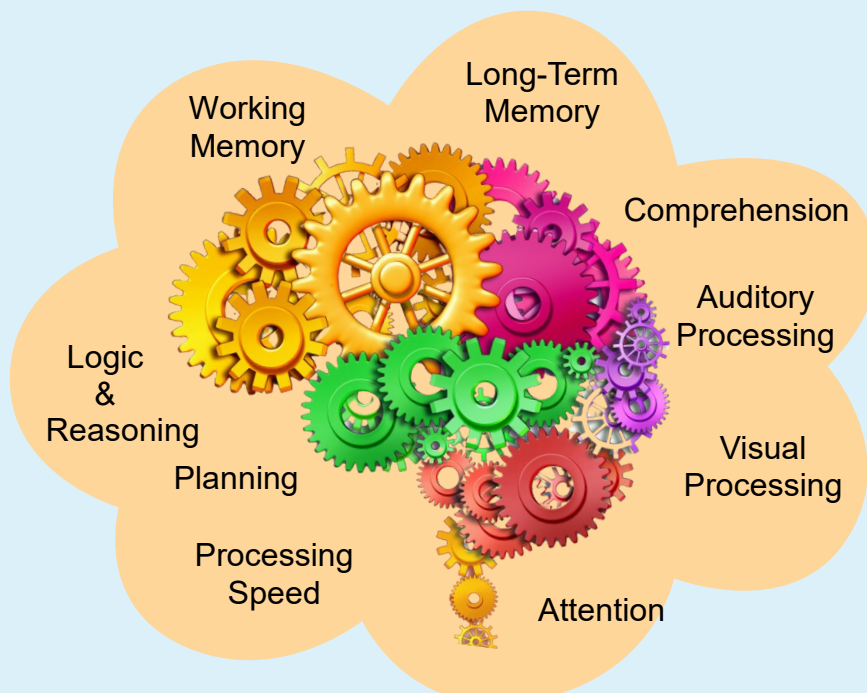Do students currently have the skills needed to attain these goals?

Defining Behavior

Behavior refers to how an individual conducts themselves in response to a situation or environment. From the time a child is born, they rapidly develop the ability to express a variety of emotions and learn to cope with and manage feelings. These emotions or feelings may be expressed through visual or verbal cues, or behaviors. The foundations of social competence in the first five years of a child's life have been linked to the ability to form positive relationships and later success in school.

What is Developmentally Appropriate Behavior?

During the first few years of life, the brain develops rapidly, forming neural connections that are crucial for successful adulthood. Executive functions of the brain, including inhibitory control, are important for regulating behavior and emotions. Preschool children who have a strong emotional foundation can better manage social interactions, making it important for teachers to support their emotional development. Developmentally appropriate practice, which promotes each child's optimal development and learning through joyful, play-based approaches, is essential for early childhood educators to implement. This includes having appropriate behavioral expectations based on each child's unique developmental stage and skill acquisition.

Working Memory
Long-Term Memory
Comprehension
Auditory Processing
Logic & Reasoning
Visual Processing
Planning
Processing Speed
Attention

Executive function is the ability to focus, hold, and work with information in the mind. It allows us to filter distractions and change gears while focusing on multiple streams of information at the same time. Sometimes we may need to revise plans as necessary.

"Remember everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. 9 times out of 10, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry. It will break your heart." - Annette Breaux

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What is Challenging Behavior?

Challenging behaviors are persistent patterns of behavior, or perceptions of behaviors, that can interfere with optimal learning and engagement in pro-social interactions. All behaviors are a form of communication. Children communicate something through their behaviors every moment of every day.
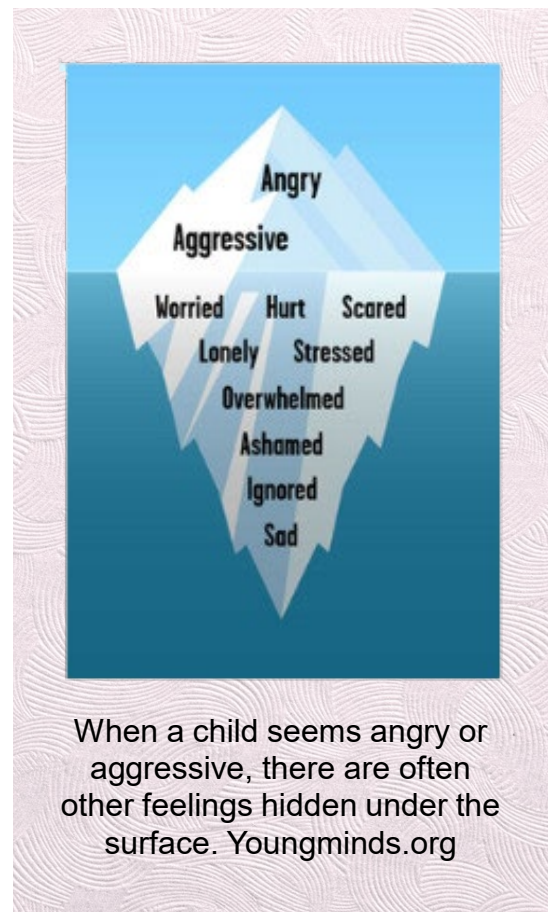
Children often engage in challenging behavior when they do not have the social skills and emotional competencies to engage in more appropriate social behaviors. Appropriate social skills and emotional competencies should be explicitly taught when children are not engaging in challenging behavior. Additionally, children should be supported to use these skills during challenging situations.

Sometimes a child's behaviors can seem so intense, so all encompassing, that our ability as adults to see challenging behaviors as one small part of a child becomes impaired, and our view of the child can narrow to the point that all we can see are the "bad" behaviors. As the designers of learning, we need to take a step back and reflect on what changes might need to be made to support this child.

Young children let adults know their wants and needs through their behavior long before they have words. They give us "cues" to help us understand what they are trying to communicate. It is our responsibility as adults to interpret cues and to set children up for success. Some children need more help managing strong emotions or disruptive behaviors. If they don't receive help early, children's behaviors can negatively impact their social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Some frequently reported prekindergarten (ages 3-5) developmentally appropriate behaviors that may be challenging for adults include:

- inability to wait or sit still for long periods of time;
- testing limits and boundaries;
- lacking impulse control and the ability to resist what is prohibited;
- arguing about their ideas and desires;
- blaming others for their behavior and may deny their role in misbehavior;
- may misbehave to gain attention from an adult;
- experimenting with profanity, sometimes to gain adult attention;
- may be aggressive and argumentative with children and adults.;
- understanding the impact of hurtful words and using them when angry; and/or
- needs assistance to calm down and regulate their emotions.

Angry
Aggressive
Worried Hurt Scared
Lonely Stressed
Overwhelmed
Ashamed
Ignored
Sad

When a child seems angry or aggressive, there are often other feelings hidden under the surface. Youngminds.org

All young children engage in challenging behavior at some point. An educator's knowledge of child development, culture, and beliefs affect how one defines and perceives a behavior as challenging. Some behaviors may feel challenging to some caregivers, despite being a normal part of development.

Challenging behaviors can manifest in a variety of ways, including:
- biting
- temper tantrums
- hitting or pushing
- talking out of turn or saying mean things
- screaming
- refusing to cooperate
- throwing or kicking toys or other objects
- lashing out

Executive functioning allows children to regulate thier behaviors. Executive function skills are essential for children to focus, plan, prioritize tasks, and manage their emotions.

List the behaviors that you find most challenging in your classroom.

Star the behavior that is currently the most challenging in your classroom.

Define and Teach Behavior Expectations

Taking an instructional approach and mindset to behavior gives children the chance to learn and practice how to behave in a learning environment. Teachers need to remember that children need to be explicitly taught what expected behaviors are in each environment inside and outside the classroom. Teachers should identify a small number of behavioral expectations (e.g., be kind, be safe), defining specific examples (rules) of what those expectations look like across common settings or routines (e.g., circle time, centers, snack, bathroom, playground), and directly teaching children how to put those expectations into practice.

Instructional Mindsets			
Intentionality	**Flexibility**	**Differentiation and Individuation**	**Reflection**
Teachers use instructional strategies purposefully and are able to articulate specific drivers (e.g., children's prior knowledge, learning goals, sequence within content areas)	Teachers are aware of the range of effective instructional strategies, how and when to implement them, and when to switch strategies or formats (e.g., whole class, small group).	Teachers generate or individualize instructional strategies as needed to efficiently meet the diverse abilities and needs of students.	Teachers rely on reflective practices to make intentional, creative instructional decisions and avoid overreliance on default practices.

For example, a teacher who has the classroom expectation "Be safe" may have decided that one component of this is that children must use "walking feet" when inside and on paved areas outside, but they may run on the grassy area of the playground. Teaching this specific example of what it means to be safe could involve a game outside in which the teacher holds up a picture of "running" or "walking" as children respond by moving to the appropriate areas of the playground. In the classroom, teaching this expectation could involve making a picture chart of places where children may run or walk during a group meeting.

No matter the behavior, it's crucial that teachers separate the problem from the child and remember that no one is perfect (or the sum of their mistakes). Instead, it's about helping the child understand the error of their ways, learn from the experience, and be able to apply strategies when faced with future experiences that may challenge them.

Educators need to understand that children often communicate through their behavior, especially when they are unable to verbalize their feelings. Some children need more help managing strong emotions or disruptive behaviors. Early educators can intentionally provide experiences that foster positive relationships which will assist children in developing relationships and social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

It is important to remember that all behaviors:

- serve a purpose,
- are learned over time and can be replaced,
- are shaped by the environment,
- are repeated because they have been effective, and
- are predictable and preventable.

Using the behavior you identified on page 5, reflect on the following:

When does the behavior occur (e.g., mealtime, whole group, transitions)?

What do you think is the reason for why the behavior might be occurring (e.g., bored, not enough materials, a challenging task, attention seeking)?

Considering the Instructional Mindsets on page 6, what instructional and/or environmental changes have you tried?

Adult Responsibilities

The key to teaching children social and emotional skills is creating a classroom culture built on community. Strong communities have members who have shared goals and experiences, who feel empowered to contribute, who trust in one another, and who feel understood and capable as individuals.

Classrooms should allow children to feel that:

- I belong here.
- I am safe.
- I matter, and everyone else in the group matters too.
- When we have problems, we can work them out.
- Together we can do great things.

Fostering positive relationships with young children is a fundamental aspect of high-quality prekindergarten programming. Children flourish and learn to manage their emotions and behaviors better when they feel a positive connection with teachers and peers. A sense of community is created in the prekindergarten classroom thanks to these relationships, which sets the stage for open communication in case any challenges arise.

Tips for Building Relationships

With Students:
- Greet each child by name
- Listen and learn about their interests
- Provide praise and encouragement
- Provide opportunities for students to share about their culture and home language
- Display children's authentically created work
- Follow children's lead during play
- Let absent children know they were missed

With Families and Caregivers:
- Understand and be responsive to families within the context of their culture
- Engage in on-going reciprocal communication in preferred languages
- Actively Listen
- Be responsive to concerns or changes
- Attend a neighborhood or community event

Relationships

List the ways you currently connect and build relationships with students.

List ways you currently connect and build relationships with families.

What is one new strategy you can try to further connect and build relationships with students and families?

"A child whose behavior pushes you away is a child who needs connection before anything else." - Kelly Bartlett

Impact of Challenging Behaviors

Every year, thousands of preschool children in the United States are either suspended or expelled from their early childhood care and education programs. While suspension refers to the temporary removal of a child from class, expulsion involves the termination of educational services entirely (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2013). The rate of preschool expulsion is much higher among African American boys. Half of the 17,000 preschool students who were suspended or expelled nationwide in 2021 were African American boys, even though they represent about twenty percent of prekindergarten enrolled children.

Data indicates that expulsions and suspensions occur regularly in early childhood settings and at a much higher rate than in K-12 education. Children under five years old are expelled at three times the rate of their K-12 counterparts. Students from state-funded prekindergarten, private and community childcare programs expel children at more than thirteen times the rate of K-12 students.

Common explanations that programs have reported for excluding children is that they are too disruptive such as excessive crying, inattention, and inability to follow directions. Other exclusionary dangerous behaviors also reported include biting, hitting, or otherwise harming themselves or others. Challenging behaviors are a common occurrence in childhood development and are quite normal in 10-30% of children between the ages of 2 and 5 (Zeng, Corr, O'Grady, Guan 2019).

In New York State, according to Commissioner's Regulations §200.20(b)(7)(b) except as provided pursuant to section 201.8 of this Title, no preschool student with a disability may be suspended, expelled or otherwise removed by the provider from an approved preschool special education program or service because of the student's behavior prior to the transfer of the student to another approved program recommended by the committee on preschool special education.

How do I typically respond to a child's challenging behavior?

What does my program currently do when a child has repeated challenging behaviors?

The use of exclusionary discipline practices in prekindergarten classrooms can have profound and far-reaching effects on children, their families, and the educational system as a whole. When children are excluded from the classroom due to disciplinary actions, they miss out on valuable learning opportunities which can lead to gaps in their educational and social-emotional development, while impacting their perception of themselves and their view of school.

The use of exclusionary discipline practices can also cause stress for families. Parents and caregivers may feel frustrated, helpless, and concerned about the well-being of their children. This added stress can have a ripple effect on the family's overall well-being. Research has shown that exclusionary discipline techniques tend to disproportionately impact children and families who are most in need of early intervention and support (Zinsser, K. M., et al, (2022). This can exacerbate educational disparities and create a cycle of disadvantage for already vulnerable students.

Strategies to Reduce Exclusionary Discipline

Before challenging behaviors can be addressed, educators must:
- Explicitly teach and model expected behaviors across different learning environments (e.g., classroom, playground, library, bathroom).
- The teaching of behavior should be taught and reviewed throughout the school year to encourage mastery (e.g., first day of school, after a break, etc.).
- Acknowledge when students are seen behaving in the expected ways.
- Carefully observe the child to identify triggers for their behavior and any patterns that emerge. Are there specific situations, times of day, or individuals that seem to trigger the behavior?

Communication: Encourage open communication with the child to help them express their feelings and needs. Sometimes, young children lack the vocabulary to express themselves effectively, leading to frustration.

Positive Behavior Support: Implement strategies that focus on reinforcing positive behaviors rather than punishing negative ones. Positive reinforcement and praise can be powerful tools in shaping a child's behavior.

Collaboration: Involve parents or guardians in the process. They can provide valuable insights into the child's behavior at home, which can help in creating a consistent approach to addressing it.

Professional Support: If the behavior persists and becomes unmanageable, it may be necessary to seek guidance from a child psychologist or counselor who specializes in early childhood development. For preschool students with disabilities seek guidance from the child's special education provider and Committee on Preschool Special Education for how to best support student needs and develop strategies to meet student's individualized education program (IEP) goals

Cultural Identity

According to the NYSED [Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework](#), culture is defined as, "the multiple components of one's identity, including but not limited to: race, economic background, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, and ability. At birth, infants begin to absorb their family's culture and form a cultural identity within the context of their family. This includes the family's language, patterns of communication and the tone of voice used to express love, comfort, anger, displeasure, and other emotions. Culture identity is central to how people live, speak, and interact in the world. Family culture also includes mannerisms such as touching/hugging (or not), making eye-contact, rules of behavior and sleeping and eating patterns (Derman-Sparks, Edwards & Goins, 2020).

When children attend preschool, they bring these learned practices with them to the program. These practices are the tools the children have to interact, understand, and navigate the world around them (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2019). They begin to sort out which practices are flexible, and which are absolutes. For example, they begin to recognize when noisy play is okay and that hitting someone is never okay. Preschool children must learn what message is acceptable and not acceptable. When the preschool child enters a classroom, they feel that the way their family does things is normal. (Derman-Sparks, Edwards & Goins, 2020).

As a teacher of young children, it is important to recognize that children come to the classroom with varying family experiences and these experiences may not be like yours. As teachers, we can support the child's developing cultural identity and provide opportunities for them to learn about cultural diversity and fairness. Sometimes something that we perceive as a teacher as a challenging behavior may be a result of the child's family norms.

How were you required to behave when you were a child?

What were the adult-child relationships like in your family?

What behavior was expected in your school?

How has your upbringing influenced your view of children's behavior and your connection with their families?

Supporting Emergent Multilingual Learners

Emergent multilingual learners (EMLs) come to the classroom with many lived experiences, family relationships, home language(s), and practices that may or may not carry over to the early childhood setting. Teachers of EMLs integrate children's home languages strategically to support comprehension, engagement, scaffolding, practice, assessment, and extending. From the physical environment to the daily schedule, the teacher models the usefulness of the home language for learning and promotes a positive perspective of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

How to Support EMLs

- Create a multilingual library.
- Introduce translations of target vocabulary, teaching the English word alongside the word in the home languages.
- Encourage singing, counting and narrations in the home languages.
- Label objects in the classroom in both English and the home languages. Learn the translation of these objects from families or from translation software.
- Incorporate in the classroom familiar objects (i.e., pictures, household items, clothing, toys, etc.) from children's countries and cultures and encourage children to name and use them.
- Learn and use key phrases in the home languages of the children.
- Encourage children to speak to classmates who share their language.
- Develop a thorough selection of visual aids labeled in multiple languages.
- Partner with staff who can aid in translation and interpretation and transcribe children's narrations on their drawings.

PAUSE & REFLECT

How do you currently support EML students in your classroom?

What other strategies could you incorporate into your classroom?

Supporting Students with Disabilities

Preschool students with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs where they receive individualized and appropriate support to meet their needs. School districts are responsible for ensuring that a free appropriate public education is provided to preschool students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

It is important for teachers of preschool students to ensure all learners can access and meaningfully participate in classroom activities. For preschool students with disabilities, this can be accomplished by making instructional and physical modifications in response to the student's needs and goals and through collaboration with the student's special education or related service provider. Some students may come to the program with an individualized education program. Others, based on developmental screening results and teacher observations may need more support in one or more developmental domains. Sharing developmental progress with parents and service providers, as well as understanding the process for referring a child to the committee on preschool special education for consideration when appropriate, are important practices for all teachers of preschool children.

How to Support Students with Disabilities

- Be aware of the student's IEP goals and services. Include activities in the classroom lesson plans that support the goals. Partner with service providers to ensure appropriate supports are provided to the child.

- Be sure that your classroom is physically accessible for all students. Remove any barriers that might prevent a child getting from one place to another.

- Position children with disabilities in the midst of their peers; do not place the child in a wheelchair at the edge of the group or the student with aggressive tendencies away from his peers.

- Encourage children without disabilities to work and interact with children who do have disabilities.

- Provide children who struggle with communication alternate ways to express themselves. This could involve using visual cues including a visual schedule.

- Have high expectations for all children, regardless of their ability levels.

"Every student can learn, just not on the same day or in the same way."
-George Evans

Finding Support

How do you currently support students with disabilities in your classroom?

What other strategies could you incorporate into your classroom?

Resources to Support All Learners

NYSED Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion The office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion works with schools to provide resources, support, and professional development for working with all students and ensuring an equal education for all.

Bilingual Education Office - The Office of Bilingual Education has resources for educators and parents in preparing students for future success. Resources include briefs, best practices, journals and tools to use when working with EML students.

Special Education Office - The NYSED Office of Special Education provides assistance for schools and programs serving children with disabilities. The office offers resources, and information for professional development on successfully helping all students succeed.

NYS Pyramid Model - The NYS Pyramid Model website offers support and professional development for all NYS Educators in working towards the positive social and emotional development of all young children.

Student Support Services The Student Support Services office promotes school improvement by focusing on social and emotional development and learning.

Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) The ECAC provides early learning resources to support practitioners in the field.

Council on Children and Family Services (CCF) - New York State's CCF provides information and resources to families and early childhood educators in supporting young children's learning and development.

Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) The New York State Office of Children and Family Services provides a range of resources to help parents with their child care needs, people who want to start or are currently running child care programs, and anyone with a concern about the health or safety of a child in a day care program.

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Working with Prekindergarten Students with a Disability

Q. Can prekindergarten students with an IEP be suspended, expelled, or otherwise removed by a prekindergarten provider?

A. No. As per 8 NYCRR 200.20 no prekindergarten student with a disability may be suspended, expelled, or otherwise removed by the provider from an approved preschool special education program or service because of the student's behavior prior to the transfer of the student to another approved program recommended by the committee on preschool special education (CPSE).

Q: What actions are preschool programs expected to take if they are not permitted to suspend students who exhibit dangerous or disruptive behaviors?

A: Providers and CPSEs must ensure that positive behavioral supports and interventions have been developed and implemented to meet the child's needs. If the existing level of support is not sufficient, the CPSE should be made aware so it may determine if additional assessments are needed, including assessing behavior. The CPSE will meet to review those assessments and the student's IEP to evaluate the existing services and potentially recommend additional supports or a change in services and/or placement.

Q: When a student's behaviors become a concern and are not able to be successfully addressed in the classroom, what steps should be taken if suspension is not an option?

A: The CPSE should convene to discuss the student's behaviors and determine whether it would be appropriate to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA). An FBA is the process of determining why a student engages in challenging behavior and how the student's behavior relates to the environment. FBAs can provide the CPSE with information to develop a hypothesis as to why the student engages in the behavior, when the student is most likely to demonstrate the behavior, and the situations in which the behavior is least likely to occur. The results of the FBA are reviewed by the CPSE and the development of a behavioral intervention plan (BIP) is considered. A BIP is a plan that is based on the results of the FBA and, at a minimum, includes a description of the problem behavior, global and specific hypotheses as to why the problem behavior occurs, and intervention strategies that include positive behavioral supports and services to address the behavior.

For additional information please visit the NYSED Office of Special Education webpage on [Behavioral Supports and Interventions](#).

"Challenging behavior occurs when the demands and expectations being placed upon a child outstrip the skills they have to respond." - Ross Greene

What is Implicit Bias?

Even the most experienced teachers may not be aware of how their unconscious attitudes influence their interactions with children, shaping their expectations and perceptions of the children's skills, abilities, and behavior. When a student's behavior differs from a teacher's expectations and/or viewpoints, the teacher may seek methods to modify or regulate the behavior. However, at times, children's behaviors are linked to cultural standards and values that vary from those of the teacher. Acknowledging how the student's culture and background influence their conduct is essential for educators to be culturally sensitive in supporting each child in the classroom.

Webster's dictionary defines implicit bias as "bias that results from the tendency to process information based on unconscious associations and feelings, even when these are contrary to one's conscious or declared beliefs". Implicit bias refers to the automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways. All individuals have some extent of implicit bias and it's important for teachers to be aware of any biases that may be impacting how we respond to a child's behavior.

Over the course of our lifetimes, we develop biases about individuals and groups based on their membership in social categories, including race and gender. These social biases reflect cultural mind-sets, stereotypes, and prejudices that are pervasive in our communities.

Individuals have multiple social, individual and personal identities which contribute to who they are. Personal identities include a person's name, interests, talents, home language, and relationships with family members. These characteristics give each person a sense of belonging. This identity in children is nurtured by the child's temperament, home, extended family, and by community and school experiences (Derman-Sparks, Edwards, Goins, 2020).

As early childhood educators it is important to consider ways to support the development of the child's positive self-concept. Sometimes a challenging behavior may manifest because there is a misunderstanding by the child of what is normal behavior at school versus what is allowed at home.

What is an example of an implicit bias that you may have about specific students or groups of students?

How might these biases impact how you respond to challenging behaviors?

Learning Environment

Teachers design classrooms so that they serve as extensions of their responsibility to shape and foster learning. The spaces or learning centers in the room should invite children to explore, converse, inquire, build, and create individually, and as part of the classroom community.

Teachers provide materials and props in clearly defined learning centers, to capture and sustain children's interest. Blocks of time and flexibility in scheduling allow children to explore the learning environment and make choices among the wealth of materials and activities provided in the classroom. The daily schedule is adjusted to accommodate a specific theme or project. Teachers should be flexible in changing the learning environment when situations require them to make on the spot decisions to redirect behavior.

For example, a teacher noticed the students were running in the classroom. After observing the behaviors, the teacher noticed that the wide open spaces in the classroom promote running. In addition to lessons on how to move safely around the room, the teacher also arranged furniture to prevent the opportunities to run.

When designing learning centers, teachers should:

- Be mindful of and accommodate/plan for the varying strengths, skills and abilities, cultures, languages, experiences, and developmental levels of individual students.

- Make adaptations, modifications, and accommodations as needed to support the participation of all children.

- Be intentional and purposeful in the selection of materials and activities.

- Plan concrete, hands-on activities for student-directed learning.

- Eliminate worksheets and rote activities.

- Plan for meaningful interactions and opportunities for extended conversations with all students throughout the day.

- Allow sufficient time for students to self-select learning centered activities, become engaged, and to explore and experiment with the materials and activities that they choose (approximately one-third of the daily schedule).

- Provide space for displays of children's work.

- Refer to the resource Planning for High Quality Prekindergarten Programs for additional ideas.

"The emotional health of young children is closely tied to the social and emotional characteristics of the environments in which they live."
Working Paper 2 Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

Play to Support Behaviors

Play is crucial in supporting the development of children's skills during the critical period of early childhood between the ages of birth and eight. Play provides children with a vehicle for discovery, creativity, joy, and practice. Play is a natural part of a child's discovery, creativity, joy, and practice.

Play provides a foundation for children to develop their social emotional, cognitive, language literacy and physical skills. Play is often referred to as children's work as it provides children with an opportunity for learning and reinforcing skills through discovery, creativity, and practice.

During the early childhood years, children follow a general sequence of developmental social play. These stages of play involve exploring, problem solving, and having fun. As children develop and move through these stages, social and cognitive skills increase in sophistication. (ECAC Brief 8 Play). Play provides opportunities for children to take calculated risks allowing them to figure out what they can do safely and how to solve problems.

Age	Stage of Play	Examples of Play in Action*
Birth +	Onlooker Play	Notices what other children are playing; starts by watching others but then may mimic the play during or after watching another child. May engage by asking questions but makes no effort to join in play.
2 ½ - 3 ½ years	Parallel Play	Starts to play next to another child but may not talk to or interact in meaningful ways. Play might include role-playing, dress-up, and pretending.
3 – 4 ½ years	Associative Play	Interacts with other children through conversation or sharing materials, but may follow own storyline. May converse with another child about what they are doing (e.g., "I'm driving my car up the ramp") but may not engage socially or cooperatively in play with other child.
4 - 8 years +	Social and Cooperative Play	Plays with other children in meaningful ways. Engages in play scenarios where everyone is following the same storyline. May assign play roles, come up with story ideas, take turns, and negotiate. Engages in cooperative and competitive games with rules.

*Chart is from the ECAC Brief 8 Play

Try it Out!- List all of the students in your classroom. Identify what stage of play each is currently in. What are the implications for classroom instructional practices?

Stage of Play	Student Name	Classroom Instructional Practices
Onlooker Play		
Parallel Play		
Associative Play		
Social and Cooperative Play		

"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood." - Fred Rogers

Play allows children to develop self-regulation and social skills. Educators should build time throughout the day to allow children to engage in several types of play experiences that are open-ended, encourage exploration, spark imagination, encourage risk taking and provide opportunities to interact with peers and adults.

For children with challenging behaviors, teachers may need to guide play. Using the chart created in the Try it Out section on page 20, put an asterisk next to any child that exhibits a challenging behavior in the classroom. Add next to the child's name what learning areas and materials they are drawn to in the classroom.

Reflect on the following:

•Are there duplicate materials in the learning area the child is interested in?

•Is there enough time for children to engage in play in the centers (recommended time is one hour of uninterrupted play)?

•Can some of the materials or similar materials be used to create a calm down kit for the student? For example, if the child is interested in the creative arts area a small box can be created with writing/drawing instruments, paper, scissors (if appropriate), glue sticks and collage materials.

•Does the classroom offer be-by-myself areas? Does this area have soft furnishings, noise canceling headphones, books about feelings, or fine motor materials that can be squished and squeezed?

Educators may need to enter the learning area with the student and assist in guiding play. Sometimes, the source of the challenging behavior may be that the student needs support in developing fundamental skills that make them a successful play partner. During play, children's brains are actively seeking and using skills such as negotiating, improvising, communicating, critical thinking, problem-solving, taking risks, sharing ideas, perspective-taking, creating, and learning from mistakes. Providing opportunities to play allows children to develop positive relationships, to build self-esteem and self-regulation skills.

"You can learn more about a child in one hour of play than you can in one year of conversation." - Plato

Function-Based Thinking

Early childhood educators sometimes need to take a step back and observe the child within the classroom environment to determine the cause of the challenging behavior. Function-based thinking is a strategy that can be used to help determine the reason behind the behavior. The function of the behavior is the reason people behave in a certain way (Hershfeldt, Rosenberg, & Bradshaw, 2010). The following pages contain an example of an Antecedent, Behavior and Consequence (ABC) chart to help the identify the function of a child's behavior.

Each day, a person engages in millions of behaviors. These behaviors fall into four main categories:

Escape/Avoidance: The individual behaves in order to get out of a situation, avoid a task or an activity he/she does not want to do. Some avoidance behaviors might include:
- refusing to come to the table for small group;
- continuing to play when it is clean up time;
- running away on the playground when it is time to line up to go inside; and/or
- leaving the large group area.

Attention Seeking: The individual behaves to get focused attention from parents, teachers, siblings, peers, or other people that are around them. Some attention seeking behaviors might include:
- throwing a tantrum/toys;
- whining, talking out of turn or saying mean things;
- hitting others; and/or
- acting silly at inappropriate times.

Access: The individual behaves in order to get a preferred item or participate in an enjoyable activity. Some examples of access behavior might include:
- biting, hitting, shoving, or grabbing to obtain a toy from others;
- refusing to leave a preferred area when the area is full or it is not their turn;
- property destruction such as knocking over a peers block structure; and/or
- crying or screaming to be allowed to participate in a favorite activity.

Sensory Stimulation: The individual behaves in a specific way because it feels good to them. Some examples of of sensory stimulation might include:
- chewing on clothing or hair;
- rocking or bouncing;
- thumb sucking; and/or
- flapping arms or moving their hands.

PAUSE & REFLECT

Using the starred behavior on page 5, what category of function from the definitions and examples above does it fall under?
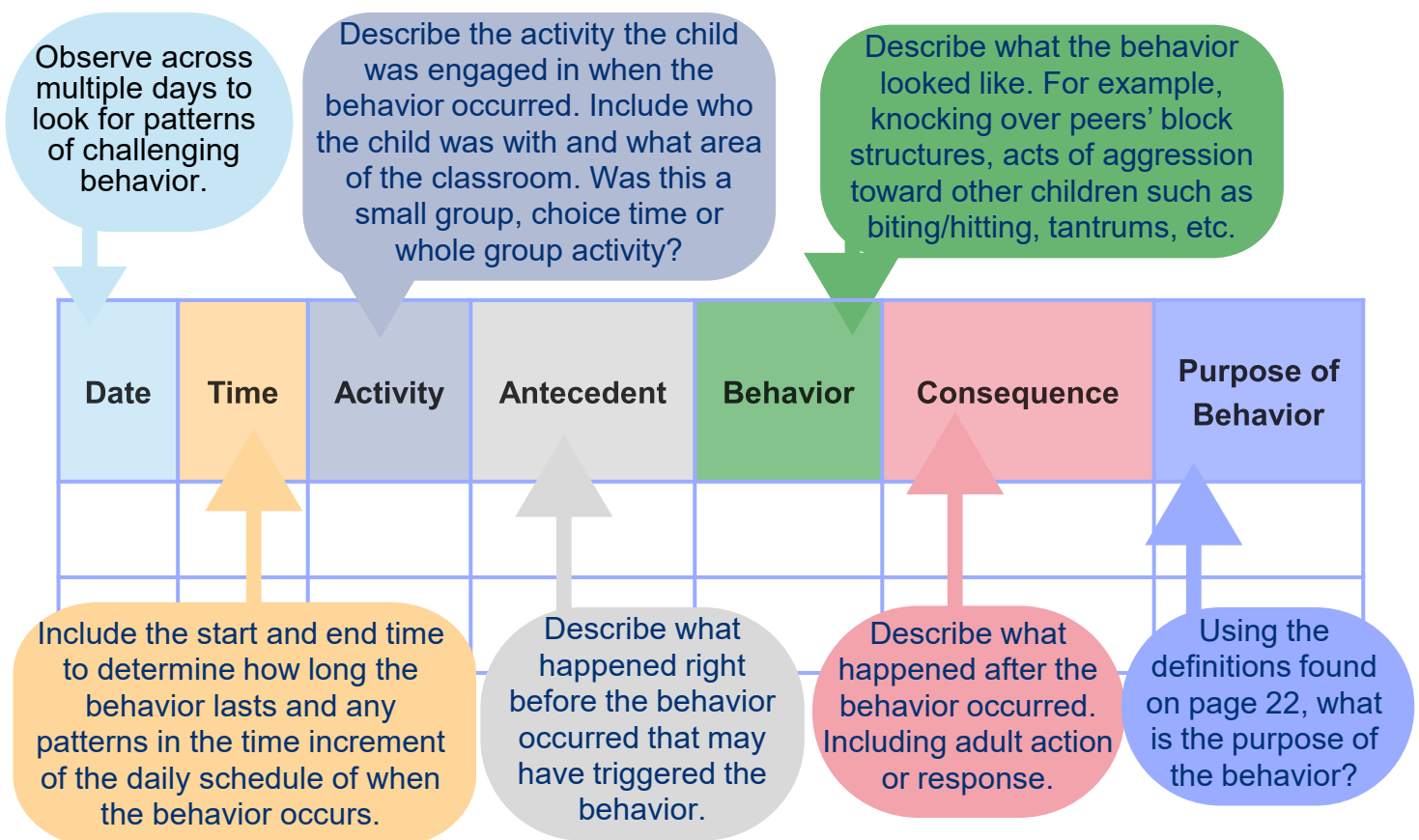
Using an ABC Chart

All behaviors serve a purpose. Understanding the underlying triggers and patterns that contribute to a challenging behavior is a crucial first step. Teachers can use Function Based Thinking (FBT) tools to assist them in defining problem behaviors and selecting solutions that match the function of the behavior. By taking the focus away from the student and shift it to the behavior, think about:
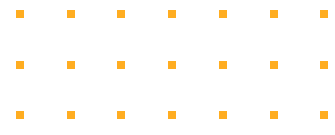- Why is the behavior occurring?
- What is the function?
- In what context/s is the behavior occurring?

Using simple tools, like the chart below, can help assist in determining the function of the behavior. This chart could be completed by a teacher, teacher's assistant, administrator or other staff member. As a reminder for OCFS licensed Pre-k programs, these documents should be used in conjunction with the written behavior management plan established as required by OCFS regulation 418-1.9. The individual completing the chart should focus only on completing the chart and shadowing the child at different times through the week. For example, small group, meal times, work times, or whole group. Ensure the observer does not have additional tasks during this time allowing them to fully focus on just the child who is exhibiting the challenging behaviors.

Observe across multiple days to look for patterns of challenging behavior.

Describe the activity the child was engaged in when the behavior occurred. Include who the child was with and what area of the classroom. Was this a small group, choice time or whole group activity?

Describe what the behavior looked like. For example, knocking over peers' block structures, acts of aggression toward other children such as biting/hitting, tantrums, etc.

Date	Time	Activity	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Purpose of Behavior

Include the start and end time to determine how long the behavior lasts and any patterns in the time increment of the daily schedule of when the behavior occurs.

Describe what happened right before the behavior occurred that may have triggered the behavior.

Describe what happened after the behavior occurred. Including adult action or response.

Using the definitions found on page 22, what is the purpose of the behavior?

Teachers must then consider what changes they can make to shift their own behavior or the learning environment to prevent the problem from occurring. It is important to note that FBT is NOT a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA), although it adheres to the same basic principles. Steps include gathering information, development of a plan that ensures interventions match the function of the behavior, and evaluation/monitoring of the plan. For more information on FBT, please see: Office of Special Education Partnership - Function Based Thinking

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Example

Date	Time	Activity	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Purpose of Behavior
2/5	8:24-8:34	free play at the puzzles with 2 friends (M.P & C.T) at the table	teacher gave 2 minute warning to clean up	Yelling and throwing puzzle pieces	Friends yelled, teacher removed child from the table	Access
2/5	9:03-9:05	whole class - making center choice plans	The block center is filled with students. Child cannot choose to go to the center	Yelling and pushing their way into the area	Teacher sits child at the table and gives them a different activity	Access
2/5	11:30-11:33	Meal time sitting next to M.P.	M.P. brought a lunch from home with a special treat	Grabs the treat and does not give it back when M.P. tries to get it back she pushes M.P. off the chair	Teacher takes the treat and give it to M.P. removing child from the lunch table.	Access

Based on the chart above, what are some strategies you would implement if this child was your student?

Developing a Support Plan

Once the ABC chart has been completed, the next step in the process is to develop a plan that supports a change in the child's behavior. As the ABC chart is reviewed, consider the following:

- In what setting(s) does the behavior occur (blocks, lunch, rest time, etc.)?

- Is there a setting where the behavior does not occur (include indoor and outdoor)?

- Who is present when the behavior occurs?

- What actions or interactions take place prior to the behavior?

- What happens after the behavior?

After the function of the behavior has been considered and the responses to the above questions are reviewed, a support plan that outlines the methods for teaching and reinforcing the replacement behavior should be developed.

The goal when developing the support plan is to replace the challenging behavior by teaching a developmentally and socially appropriate behavior. During this process, the student will be learning a new skill while replacing the behavior. It is important to build into the plan how the teacher and other adults in the room will redirect the behavior.

Using consistent strategies will ensure that the child is quickly and effectively prompted to replace the challenging behavior. De-escalation strategies such as verbal prompts or a subtle gesture can be used (see page 27). It is important when developing the plan to use the information from the program's progress monitoring tool to ensure expectations are developmentally appropriate and the intervention is effective. Develop a realistic timeline for plan implementation that includes gathering necessary supplies to reinforce the positive behavior and ensuring all staff in the classroom are aware of the action plan steps for consistency.

If the plan succeeds, expect fewer challenging behaviors and more frequent use of replacement behaviors by the child. Keep in mind that it may take several weeks for the child to grasp the new skill. Offer chances for practice and positive reinforcement when the desired behavior is demonstrated. If there is no improvement in the frequency or duration of challenging behaviors, reassess the data and the plan, and make necessary adjustments.

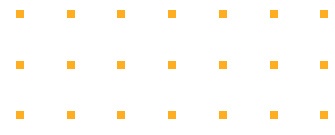Create a chart using the prompts below to develop your plan!

Support Plan Process	Our Plan
Replace: problem behavior by teaching a socially acceptable, efficient behavior that allows student to obtain the pay-off/function.	
Prevent: problem behaviors by directly addressing triggers & prompting replacement behaviors based on the function of behavior.	
Reinforce: replacement & desired behaviors based on function/pay off for the student.	
Redirect: problem behaviors by quickly & effectively redirecting student to replacement behavior.	
Minimize Reinforcement: by ensuring that problem behaviors do NOT pay off for the student (i.e., does not result in the function of behavior).	
Plan for progress monitoring: using tools from your progress monitoring assessment, document the progress the student is making.	

For more detailed information on Function Based Thinking and creating a support plan, please see the Office of Special Education Partnership resource Function-Based Thinking (FBT) Applying a Proactive Process to Support Student Behavior in the Classroom by scanning the QR Code below.

Strategies for De-escalation

As an early educator it is important to remember that when a challenging behavior occurs in the classroom to not take it personally. Our facial expression or body language can communicate to the child that we are frustrated with them. It is important to stay calm and patient and to provide consistency when interacting with the child. Learning and using simple de-escalation techniques can help provide support to the child when the situation is challenging.

While the challenging behavior is occurring:

- Think about what the cause of the behavior may be. Is the child hungry, tired, or need to use the bathroom? If so, address those needs first.

- Keep verbal guidance short, calm, and respectful.

- Encourage and model how to take deep breaths. Use a visual cue such as an expandable ball sphere.

- Speak in a calm voice and bend down to the child's level. If the child is laying on the floor, sit or kneel on the child's level.

- Develop logical consequences related to the challenging behavior and follow through on using them. For example, if the child is having a challenging time waiting for a turn in the block area say, "Let's try a different area until someone leaves the block area. What area would you like to try?"

- Before using a calming touch such as putting your hand on the child's shoulder or rubbing the child's back, ask the child if it is ok.

- Acknowledge the child's feeling and empathize with them. For example, I know it is hard when you can not go to the block area because there are already too many children there.

- If necessary, move the child away from others or move children away from the child while the child calms down.

It is important when presented with a challenging behavior in the classroom to avoid a power struggle with the child and to avoid demands, ultimatums, or mentions of consequences. For example, telling the child if you do not stop now, you are going on your cot or are losing outdoor time today. Often threats like these can make the situation more challenging.

PAUSE & REFLECT

What are some de-escalation techniques you currently use in your classroom?

Do these techniques work? Why/why not?

What are some new strategies you can try?

Partnering with Families

Partnering with families can be one of the most rewarding and challenging experiences in an educator's career. Throughout a child's life, parents and caregivers will be responsible for making the key decisions that support their child. Families will have pertinent information about the child's development including their health history, family culture and home language, adverse childhood experiences, typical routines, social support, and stressors.

As early educators, you are in a unique position to share valuable information about their child's social and emotional development. Partnering with families is a key component in finding positive solutions for a child who may be exhibiting challenging behavior.

Building a relationship with the family will grow when there is trust and mutual respect. Educators and families must work as a team for the best interests of the child . Sometimes there may be resistance on the part of the family member(s) to seek support for their child.

There are many reasons families may resist including:

- a relationship has not been established between the family and educator;
- they may feel that they are being judged for their parenting skills;
- they are afraid there is something wrong with their child;
- they do not see the same behaviors at home;
- there is no documentation to back up what the educator is seeing;
- they are overwhelmed by the referral process for special education services; and/or
- they are afraid their child will be labeled as "bad".

As educators, it is important to empower the family member(s) by acknowledging their ideas, providing child development information, and respecting their opinions. Communicate with families in their home language using interpreters or translated materials. Developing a team approach will support the child's best interests and empowers the family to have an active role in their child's educational experience.

When communicating with family members:

What practices do you currently have in place to communicate with families?

Do you listen carefully, or do you interrupt?

Do you stand close to the person you're addressing or far away?

Are you comfortable having difficult conversations with the family? (if not, try practicing with a coworker prior to meeting with families).

Do you consider your tone and vocabulary when conversing with families?

Additional Resources

IDEAS that Work
- [Early Childhood Resource Guide: Strengthening and Coordinating Systems to Eliminate Exclusionary Discipline](#)
- [Understanding and Eliminating Expulsion in Early Childhood Programs](#)
- [Expelling Expulsion: Using the Pyramid Model to Prevent Suspensions, Expulsions, and Disciplinary Inequities in Early Childhood Programs](#)

National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations | ChallengingBehavior.org
- [Self-Care for Teachers: Regulating Your Responses](#)
- [Addressing Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Early Childhood Programs Resource Collection](#)
- [Building Routines](#)
- [Communication is Key](#)
- [Communication with Families: 3 Key Steps](#)
- [Developing Neutralizing Routines](#)
- [Reframing Behavior](#)

National Institute for Early Education Research
- [Challenging Behaviors and the Role of Preschool Education](#)

TEACHING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS
[Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning What Works Briefs](#)
- [Label feelings in self and others to start perspective taking](#)
- [Problem Solve](#)
- [Emotional Literacy](#)
- [Friendship Skills](#)

NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council – Pyramid Model
- [Locate Master Cadre Trainers](#) by Region.

NYSED
- [Office of Special Education Partnership](#) – Regional teams and Technical assistance Partnerships that provide direct training and support to families, approved preschool and school-age programs, public schools and districts, and community partners.
- Office of Student Support Services – [Social Emotional Learning](#)

In District Supports
Seek out those who are experts in the area of discipline and behavior (e.g., instructional coaches, school psychologist, school counselors, principal, bilingual teachers) to support you and provide guidance.

Video Resources

Social Justice, Equity and Anti-Bias Early Childhood Education Video Series

These professional development videos feature dynamic presenters as they discuss topics on anti-bias education, social justice education, trauma and systemic racism, and culturally reflective practices.

Video Series: No Small Matter, Equity and Social Justice in Early Childhood Education, and Meeting All Children's Developmental Needs Through Anti-Bias Education

Videos are available on NYSED's website or by scanning the QR code.

The Value of Play

The Value of Play Webinar, which took place on January 25, 2024, is designed to help teachers and administrators understand the value of play in children's development and learning. Play-based learning is a multifaceted approach that helps children work toward learning goals and meet developmental expectations. To access the webinar video, please visit The Value of Play or by scanning the QR code.

P-3 Webinar Series

The NYSED Office of Early Learning offers a P-3 webinar series that is focused on resources and tools for classroom teachers, school administrators, and P-3 educators. All events will be open to the public and free. Please check this page for future and recorded events.

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