

Challenging Behaviors Mean Challenged Children

Guidance with Children Who Show Challenging Behaviors

by Dan Gartrell and Michael Gallo

Dan Gartrell is a former sixth grade teacher in Ohio and Head Start teacher for the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe in northern Minnesota. During the 1970s, Dan completed his Masters degree at Bemidji State University where he was a CDA trainer for

the Child Development Training Program. Dan received his Doctor of Education Degree from the University of North Dakota in 1977. For nearly 40 years, Dan was director of the Child Development Training Program and professor of Early Childhood and Foundations Education at Bemidji State University. Dan is Emeritus Professor from Bemidji State. Between November of 2005 and November of 2014, Dan was primary author of a column for *Young Children* titled "Guidance Matters," appearing in three issues a year. Dan has written an additional 10 articles that have appeared in *Young Children* and *Teaching Young Children*. Dan is the author of four books: *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom* (Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 6th edition, October 2014), *The Power of Guidance* (Delmar/NAEYC, 2004), *What the Kids Said Today* (Redleaf Press, 2000), *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills* (NAEYC, 2012). The two books published by NAEYC were both honored as Comprehensive Membership selections. Three of his pieces on Aggression, Conflict Mediation, and Guiding Children's Behavior have been accepted for publication in the upcoming SAGE *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Early Childhood Education*. Dan has presented over 300 keynotes, workshops, and trainings at national conferences and in many states, Germany, and Mexico. Dan is a member of a blended family that includes wife, Dr. Julie Jochum, five children aged 36 to 49, and eleven grand children!

Michael Gallo

Psychologists who study brain development are validating what caring educators have known for years: that there is no such thing as 'bad kids,' only kids with bad problems that they cannot solve on their own (Cozolino, 2006). Part One of this two-piece series looks at a major psychological source of children's problems and how these problems cause young children to show behaviors that are challenging. Part Two will offer seven individual- and group-focused guidance practices that assist young children in managing their problems and gaining the emotional and social strengths that help them get along.

In both parts, two basic ideas guide our conversation. First, early childhood professionals do well to think of young children not as years-old, but as months-old. A two-year-old has only 24 to 36 months of total life experience. A four-year-old has 48 to 60 months. Yet, adults sometimes expect emotional maturity from young children during conflicts (expressed disagreements) that we adults, with years of life experience, do not always show.

Second, we use the term *guidance* to define developmentally appropriate leadership with children who show challenging behaviors (Gartrell, 2012).

In immediate situations, guidance means intervening in conflicts in firm but friendly ways that calm and teach, rather than punish. In the larger sense, guidance is teaching for healthy emotional and social development.

Looking at the two ideas together, with limited experience and rapid but still early brain development, young children show only the beginnings of social-emotional competence. Because they are just beginning a complex, life-long learning process, children often make mistakes in their behavior. Guidance represents an approach adults take to help children learn from their mistakes, rather than punish them for the mistakes they make; help children learn to solve their problems, rather than punish them for having problems that they have not yet learned how to solve. Guidance is based on, and always endeavors to build, positive adult-child and adult-adult relationships.

Challenging Behaviors Mean Challenged Children

Back in the 1960s, before the time of neurological brain research, the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1962) famously wrote of a hierarchy of needs, and of two sources of internal motivation that

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drive those needs. The first motivational source, more powerful especially in the young, is for physical and emotional safety: freedom from physical and psychological threats including abuse and neglect, hunger and housing insecurity, dysfunctional attachments with family members, and the like. (In the two decades that followed, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth documented that the primary dynamic in helping infants and young children meet their safety needs is a secure relationship with at least one significant adult) (Gartrell, 2012).

With safety needs met, infants and young children are free to respond to Maslow's second motivation source: for psychological growth. Rather than show the often challenging survival behaviors of children deprived of safety needs, children able to respond to the intrinsic growth motivation show an amazing capacity for initiative in new situations and for impressive learning capacity in fundamentally healthy emotional, social, cognitive, and physical ways. Here's an illustration of Ansha, 56-months-old, responding to growth needs-motivation.

On a Friday afternoon at preschool, Ansha's dear friend Lena went home wearing her long dark hair. On Monday morning, after being left in her older sister's care for the weekend, Lena came into the classroom with a blue buzz cut! Lena asked Ansha what she thought of her haircut. Ansha started to say something else, then replied, "I am still getting used to it." "Me, too," said Lena and the two went off to play. Ansha's intelligent and ethical reply to her friend indicates the motivational source in the child's behavior.

In the Age of Brain Research

Since the 1990s, amazing new equipment for studying brain activity has

enabled neuropsychologists to document and assess physiological responses within the brain to outside stimuli (Elliot, 2003). These neuropsychologists have found two basic brain processes that help to explain the two motivational dynamics theorized by Maslow. The first dynamic develops early in life to help the infant react to discomfort (which the infant intuitively perceives as threat). Robust crying is the primary expression of this dynamic. The amygdala is the brain center that regulates the sensing of threat and the consequent hormone and bodily reactions to it. Survival behaviors, known as "fight, freeze, or flee" behaviors, are the classic result of amygdala-driven reactions to perceived threat (Gunnar, Herrera & Hostinar, 2009). (A baby's crying in this sense can be termed a 'fight' reaction; regardless of the circumstances, the infant gives full voice to pain and discomfort.)

By about age three years, a second, more complex dynamic called executive functions have begun to develop within the brain's frontal lobes (Elliot, 2003). (Executive functions do not operate with maturity until an individual reaches her 20s.) Executive functions consist of the coordinated mental processes of:

- interpreting present experiences using memory of prior experience.
- forming concepts and action tendencies.
- staying on course with intentional responses.
- perceiving the results of the course of action and continuing onward with executive 'functioning.'

When young children perceive a threat, the set of reactions having to do with survival behaviors overwhelms the beginning operations of executive function (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Amygdala brain reactions override the

more balanced functioning mediated by the frontal lobes. If the threat is severe enough or continuing, the child feels stress at high levels that becomes central to the child's state of mind. These children are over-sensitized to threat, perceiving it in everyday situations that others in the child's world see as ordinary. They show frequent and sometimes extreme fight, freeze, or flee reactions during conflicts, frequently in the form of aggression, which all around the child finds challenging (Lowenthal, 1999).

Toxic Stress and Conflicts

It is the viewpoint of the authors that children who experience frequent and serious conflicts in early childhood settings are reacting to unmanageable stress in their lives, what Shonkoff and Garner (2012) term toxic stress. In a reaction to toxic stress, young children perceive situations as threatening and frequently show the survival behavior of aggression in a mistaken effort to fend off the real or imagined threat.

Toxic stress can be the result of environmental factors, tumultuous life circumstances experienced by the child. A second source of toxic stress is neurological, atypical brain structure or development that causes the child to become easily overloaded by ordinary situations. Children who experience this internal source of stress often prove difficult to parent and to teach. Environmental frustrations compound the stress that these children feel. Here's an illustration of environmentally-caused stress:

During the first week of preschool, Jerome, age 49 months, hit another child in the stomach. One teacher comforted the hurt child. The second teacher put Jerome on a time-out chair, "to think about what you have done." After a few minutes, the second teacher talked with Jerome and later read a book with him.

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The next week, Jerome again hit a child in the stomach. As the teacher approached him, Jerome walked to the time-out chair and said, "I'm going to the chair 'cause I'm no good." The teacher sat with Jerome and talked with him for a long time. She asked a family service worker about the boy and discovered his mother had gone into drug treatment the previous week. The children in the family had been split up among relatives. Discovering the difficult situation that Jerome was facing, the teacher worked hard to build a close relationship with him, and later built a relationship with Jerome's mother. With the teacher's assistance, Jerome made improvements in handling his stress and became friendlier to his classmates in the classroom.

And here's an illustration of neurologically-caused stress:

Teachers noticed that Ryan, age 41 months, had difficulty concentrating during many classroom tasks. When he did engage, Ryan reacted strongly to giving up the activity, either for another's turn or because of the daily schedule. Changes in the daily schedule, unless handled in a low-key way, seemed to threaten him.

On this morning, the clean-up bell rang just as Ryan was getting a turn with a long cardboard corner piece from a packing crate that he was using as a ramp for his truck. Ryan fell to the ground, pulled the ramp down on top of himself, and began to scream. His teacher calmly explained that it was time for Ryan and the class to go outside and that afterwards Ryan could use the ramp and ball again. Ryan continued wailing until the teacher asked him if they could put the ramp in a special place so he could be sure to get it when they came in. Ryan, now smiling, immediately stood up and carried the ramp to a spot behind the teacher's table.

The teacher made sure Ryan found the ramp and ball as soon as the class returned. Ryan used the ramp for 20 minutes, allowing two other children to use their own vehicles with him.



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The Challenge of Aggression

Aggression, hostile acts and words towards others, is about the most challenging behavior for early childhood professionals to work with. A traditional 'technician' reaction to aggression is to remove the 'aggressor' to a time-out chair, comfort the 'victim,' make the 'aggressor' apologize, and wait until a similar situation happens again.

Well, the chances are the sequence will happen again. Teachers who react punitively toward a child only elevate the child's stress. And make no mistake: putting a child on a time-out chair is punishment. A child in time-out is not thinking, "I am going to be a better child because of this experience. I am glad Teacher made me sit here." The child is angry with the teacher for the embarrassment experienced during the conflict. The child is angry at the one who got him in trouble. The child is feeling rejected by the classroom community and reinforced in a negative self-image (Gartrell, 2012).

Not having been taught other ways to handle conflict, the child is left with only survival-behavior reactions. Further, the child is likely to be motivated by amygdala-driven learning from the experience. The range of intuitive reactions might be from:

- "I'm going to the chair 'cause I'm not good," to
- "These people don't like me. I am going to show them," to
- "That kid got me in trouble. I am going to get him back," to
- "I'm no good so I might as well act that way."

Through punishment the technician-teacher may actually reinforce targeted bullying behavior, general acting-out behavior, and the beginning of a negative

self-fulfilling prophecy — not the results an adult wants from the erroneous effort to "shame the child into being good" (Ladd, 2006). Within the child, reactive aggression — the impulsive lashing out when someone feels threatened — begins to morph into instrumental aggression — using aggression intentionally as a mistaken approach to finding safety and security (Williford & Depaolis, 2012). A cycle of toxic stress leading to instrumental aggression, leading to punitive adult reaction, leading to self-debasement and continued stress can have long-term devastating effects for the life of a child (Gunnar, Herrera, & Hostinar, 2009; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

When conflicts occur, guidance responses by teachers who are professionals (rather than technicians) teach rather than punish. Good guidance means building a positive relationship with each child in the early childhood community. Teachers build these relationships largely outside of conflict situations, while working hard to sustain them during conflicts. As trust grows, the child becomes more able to manage stress and to gain in emotional and social strengths (Cairone & Mackrain, 2012). Gradually, the child makes progress in handling strong emotions in non-hurting ways.

We explore seven guidance practices, all based on positive relationships, in Part Two.

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This article is Part 1 of a 2-part series.
Look for Part 2 in *Exchange's*
November/December 2015 issue.

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