



Seven Guidance Practices for Children Who Show Challenging Behaviors

by Dan Gartrell and Michael Gallo



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State University. In 1977, he completed his Doctoral Degree from the University of North Dakota. 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. Between November 2005 and November 2014, Dan was primary author of the column for *Young Children* titled "Guidance Matters." Dan is the author of numerous articles and four books, two of which were honored by NAEYC as Comprehensive Membership selections. Dan has presented over 300 keynotes, workshops, and trainings at national conferences and in many states, Germany, and México. Dan is a member of a blended family that includes wife, Dr. Julie Jochum, five children aged 36 to 49, and 11 grand children!



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Part One of this series explored the idea that children who cause conflicts in early childhood settings are reacting to unmanageable stress levels in their lives (*Exchange*, September/October 2015, pp. 18-22). Their challenging behavior is really mistaken survival behavior (Gunnar, Herrera, & Hostinar, 2009). They are reacting to impulses (showing reactive aggression) or to misguided personal strategies (instrumental aggression) in an effort to defend themselves against real and imagined threats. Ironically, the challenging behaviors that these children show may actually help them defend themselves outside the haven of the early childhood program (Cairone & Mackrain, 2012).

Life experiences ranging from basic needs — insecurity (food, shelter) — to unpredictable dynamics and relationships within the family, to witnessing or experiencing violence are major environmental contributors to toxic stress (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). There may also be neurological causes within the brain, which can be aggravated by adverse life experiences. Upon arrival in the program, stressed young children do not have the capacity to declare to a teacher, "I am highly stressed due to some difficult situations last night. May I sit and cuddle on your lap until I can cope with things?" Instead, the child might sweep a pitcher of juice off a table, or take a toy from another child in front of a teacher, or remain aloof until a simple event causes the child to lose control.

The child is seeking to find some sense of self in a world in which he otherwise

feels insignificant and devalued (Carione & Mackrain, 2012). Adults say in these situations that the child "just wants attention," but what the child really is looking for is personal affirmation and a sense of belonging (Gartrell, 2012). In the guidance approach, early childhood professionals recognize all this. They use their leadership to find ways to help the child gain a sense of positive worth and to teach the child non-hurting responses during difficult interactions with others.

Seven guidance practices empower this effort. Each is introduced here and discussed in greater depth in Dan's writings, especially his textbook (2012) and "Guidance Matters" columns in *Young Children* — see a selected list at end of article. (See further www.dangartrell.net.)

1. An Encouraging Early Childhood Community for Every Child

Some teacher-technicians think that if 80% of the children in the group are getting along and doing well, that is good enough. Yet, a setting is only truly developmentally appropriate if **every** child is successful (Hyson & Biggar Tomlinson, 2014). It is the other few children, who, due to temperament and behavior, tend to 'rub the teacher the wrong way.' (Adults can have personality conflicts even with preschoolers.) Contrary to a myth, early childhood professionals need not love every child (and feel guilty if they do not). But, they **do** need to form a positive relationship with each child — for the good of the challenged children themselves, the rest of the group, and the adults involved with the program. An encouraging early childhood community is a place where every child wants to be, even when she is sick, as opposed to not wanting to be there when she is well. The teacher uses two practices in particular to enable all children to feel welcome and valued.

First, the ECE professional monitors and modifies the program to make sure it is developmentally appropriate for every child. Often young children are just too energetic for a 'traditional' preschool day that has teacher-directed large groups, follow-directions craft activities (instead of open-ended art), limited choices in the use of materials and centers, and restricted opportunities for big body play (Martin & Slack, 2015). When teachers modify the program to include stable small groups that do things together; many open-ended, hands-on activity choices; and 'a big bunch' of active play experiences — including outdoors and in activity rooms — more children (like the other 20%) can get engaged and feel included.

Second, the ECE professional uses relationship-building techniques like *personal acknowledgment*: privately complimenting details in children's efforts and achievement (not "Good job!" but "You used every block to make

that castle!"). The adult uses compliment-giving to move into a follow-up technique: *contact talk*. Contact talk is quality time spent with an individual child. The adult listens and follows the child's line of conversation. The purpose is not to 'teach, preach, or screech,' but to have the adult and child get to know each other — the foundation of a positive relationship (Gartrell,

Illustration: Chio, aged 38 months, has covered his blue paper with white chalk.

Teacher: "You are working hard on your picture and have used a lot of white." Intentionally pauses as Chio looks at the picture and says, "Yep, diz is a bizzard and my dad's back there plowin', but you can't see him."

Teacher, smiling: "Your dad must use a pretty big plow." Chio describes the plow in detail, and the two enjoy a minute or two of conversation together.

2012).

Key Points:

- 1) Guidance talks don't have to be long, but they need to happen with every child, every day.
- 2) The guidance practices that follow work only to the extent that the teacher builds secure and caring relationships with each child in the early childhood community.

2. A Three-way Partnership

Parents are the first and foremost teachers of their children. Teachers only help.

But being a parent is a most difficult job, made more so: if one is alone; if expenses outpace income; if family members have mental health issues; if children have extreme temperaments;

if the family's culture is different than the community's; if surrogate parents are raising the child. In such cases, the help the early childhood professional provides is crucial. At no other level of education can teachers make such a profound difference in the life of a student. This impact is compounded when teachers recognize that through working closely with the parent, teacher and parent together can accomplish what neither can alone.

The early childhood professional works with friendly persistence to build relationships with family members. Recognizing that modern family life is complicated, the teacher learns as much as possible about each family, works for mutual trust, and helps family members build on their strengths for the good of the child.

Illustration: Maria's mom, Priscilla, did not attend the teacher's Greeting Meeting and first conference. Priscilla did not return phone messages the teacher left. Fighting the notion that "this parent doesn't care," teacher Inez talked with other staff. Inez learned that Priscilla worked as a cocktail waitress from 2 to 11 pm. The children stayed with Grandma while she was working. The teacher called Priscilla at the restaurant, said how much she enjoyed having Maria in her group, and asked if the two could meet sometime in a booth on Priscilla's break. Reluctantly, Priscilla asked the manager and he said sure. Priscilla and the teacher met a few times during the fall and got along well. Inez realized just how well when Priscilla accepted her invitation to come to the classroom to read to the children.

Key Point: Be friendly first ('unrelentingly positive'). Start conversations with compliments about the child. Convey to parents that you are team-

mates on the same team, not on opposing teams.

3. Large group meetings

Large group meetings begin where circle times leave off, going beyond the routines of weather and weekly calendar. Large group meetings bring the events of the day, along with problems and experiences, into thoughtful discussion. They involve respectful talking and listening that encourages the group to appreciate each other and solve problems together. A teacher might:

Introduce an activity: “Today in the art area you are going to make your own special outdoor pictures. Who can think of something you like to do outdoors?”

Lead a discussion on a problem in the classroom that has ‘gone public’:

Yesterday, some children were saying a word that bothers children and teachers. The word was ‘butthead.’ Could someone share how you would feel if someone says that to you?” The adult then guides the group in polite, but pointed, discussion about how this problem can be solved. In line with an established guideline, the names of individual children are not used. The teacher follows up privately with children she knows have been using this word.

Large group meetings do much to build encouraging early childhood communities. They are versatile in that they can address both everyday matters and public problems within the group. In response to a question readers may have, both authors know of toddler settings where the adults hold group meetings every day. Group meetings are a valuable lead-up activity for living in a democracy — at this level with the teacher as leader.

4. During Conflicts, Calm All First

Traditionally, teacher-technicians react to dramatic conflicts by ‘restoring order’ — comforting the ‘victim,’ and punishing

the ‘perp(s).’ In contrast, after triaging for physical harm, adults who use guidance calm all involved, beginning with themselves. If children are very upset, the ECE professional may remove one or both from the situation. But, this action is different than giving a time-out — placing a child on a chair as a consequence of something the child has done. No one can resolve a conflict when emotions are high. A teacher removes children only to help them calm down. When calm, the teacher uses a *guidance talk* or *conflict mediation* in order to model and teach non-hurting responses, problem solving, and reconciliation, as much as the children can learn at the time.

Often separation for a ‘cooling-down time’ is not needed. The teacher might have the children take deep breaths and otherwise ensure they really are calm before helping them mediate the situation. If a child has totally lost it **and** there is an immediate danger of harm, the adult may need to use the calming technique of last resort, the passive bear hug (PBH). Programs need to have written policies regarding this measure — such as another adult being present, written reports filed, and parents notified — before the PBH is used. The measure is arms around arms, feet around feet with the child facing away from the teacher. Child and teacher go into a sitting position with the child’s head out to the side to prevent head butting. The teacher may sing or whisper or simply hold the child to assist with the calming process. At first the child feels real threat and reacts accordingly — this is not a fun technique for any early childhood professional. Gradually, the child realizes the adult is there to help and snuggles in. Usually, when the PBH is used, the professional needs to follow up with *comprehensive guidance* to help the child reduce the need for repeat, potentially harmful tantrums.

5. Individual Guidance Talks

An *individual guidance talk* (IGT) is the intervention of choice when one child causes or falls into a conflict with a peer

or an adult. As with *class meetings* and *conflict mediation*, the purpose of the IGT is to resolve the conflict peaceably and teach the child what he can learn at the time about non-hurting responses in future conflict situations. A primary consideration is to avoid embarrassment of the child, which is perhaps the most common form of punishment used in early childhood settings (Gartrell, 2012).

The adult first gets calm and helps the child to cool down, sometimes by moving to a quieter place in the room. With the child, the adult works out exactly what happened, giving respect to the child’s viewpoint. They then discuss how they can make the situation better and what the child can do next time instead of showing aggression. Note that the adult does not force an apology, but asks how the child can help the other person feel better. If needed, give the child time to think of a way.

Illustration: Bernie, 46-months, is playing house with Carla and Dominic, both 54 months. Packing nuggets are ‘mac and cheese.’ Bernie, who is not as far along in his development as the other children, asks for more. Carla shows him the empty bowl and says there are no more. Bernie gets upset and sweeps all the plates off the table. He then gets under the table and pouts. The other two get out of the way and watch. Teacher Dana sits on the floor by Bernie and rubs his back to help him calm down. The two quietly talk about what happened and why. A few minutes later, Bernie climbs out and starts putting the ‘mac and cheese’ back in the bowl. Carla and Dominic help. At the teacher’s quiet prompt, Bernie says, “Thank you.” With the teacher watching, the three continue with their lunch (no one worrying that the ‘food’ had been on the floor).

6. Conflict Mediation

Early childhood professionals use conflict mediation when two or three children experience a conflict. We recommend following a five-step practice: the 'five finger formula.' Our illustration for this one will be a 60-month-old mediating between a 52-month-old and a 40-month-old — to make the point that the adult does not have to have a master's degree to have this practice work.

Thumb: Cool everyone down, starting with yourself. Only continue when all are calm enough to talk.

Pointer: Use negotiation to get the children to agree how each saw the conflict. Be neutral and nonjudgmental about the children's perceptions; your authority comes from being a firm and friendly mediator, not an evaluative judge.

Tall guy: Help the children brainstorm solutions to the conflict. If they need help with language or ideas, offer them and work for agreement. Defer to solutions the kids come up with *even if* it is not what you had in mind.

Ringer: Agree on a solution and try it. Use only as much leadership as you need to get the children to enact the solution. Sometimes steps three and four blend together; this is fine.

Pinky: Monitor and follow up. Compliment the children on coming to a solution. Hold a private IGT with one or both children if you feel they have more learning to do.

Key Point: Conflict mediation does not have to be done perfectly, but works 'good enough' so long as the adult shows leadership by being a mediator and holding back on personal judgments about what happened and what the resolution should be.

Illustration: When Beth began as a teacher at the child care center, Jeremiah (aged 39 months) clearly was used to being sat on 'the dreaded green chair.' In contrast, Beth modeled and taught a mediation system for handling conflicts that actively involved the children. Two years later, a few weeks before he was to start kindergarten, Jeremiah saw Curt (52 months) trying to pressure Amy (41 months) to give him a truck. Beth watched in amazement as Jeremiah walked over to the two and said, "What's going on, guys?" Curt said it was time for Amy to give the truck to him. Jeremiah asked Amy if she was done. Amy clutched the truck, turned away, and shook her head. Jeremiah told Curt, "I don't think Amy is done yet. Use another, okay?" Curt nodded. Jeremiah walked away showing a confident grin that Beth had never seen before. Amy played a bit more and then gave the truck to Curt. Beth separately complimented all three children for working out the problem.

7. Comprehensive Guidance

When children cause conflicts that are serious and repeated, professionals need to bring a mix of guidance practices together in a coordinated plan:

- The professional starts by holding a meeting with staff who work with the child. It is important that this meeting not be structured as a gripe session; the goal of this meeting is for the team to try to understand the child's pattern of behavior.
- The lead adult then contacts family members, using the urgency of the situation to request a meeting.
- Starting with positives about the child, the lead puts the problem the child is having in the context of overall progress the staff sees.

- The staff and parents discuss the need for a formal or informal Individual Guidance Plan (IGP) for improvement in the one area identified.
- They work out a plan together with the family members.
- Staff gives encouragement to the family to work on their part of the plan at home.
- Staff monitors progress in relation to the plan in the classroom.
- Staff hold one or more follow-up meetings with the parents.

Key Point: An IGP planning sheet and form are available for download at <http://dangartrell.net/presentation-handouts>. The IGP planning sheet can be used informally or formally.

Too many early childhood programs across the nation have a history of expelling from their programs children who show serious and repeated conflicts. In the guidance approach, removing children as a result of their behavior is a very last resort, only after an IGP plan is developed, tried, modified, and tried again. Starting on the very first day to build relations with parents is essential should an IGP later prove necessary. In making the case that an IGP meeting is necessary, staff may have to say this is the only way the child can continue in the program. But establishing positive relations from the beginning hopefully will make this move unnecessary.

Key Point: The more serious the situation, the more the early childhood professional collaborates with other adults in working for a resolution. Good relationships among adult professionals are as important as good relationships with children and family members. Friendly communication (even if sometimes firm) is always at the heart of guidance. The good that we do on

so many days for young children and their families makes moving toward guidance, in our view, a worthy goal for early childhood professionals. "We learn even as we teach."

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