



Handling Challenging Behavior by Teaching Better Behavior



Kayden is a 2 ½ year old boy who bangs his head against the ground and furniture. His parents are concerned that he might hurt himself and that he is unable to communicate what he wants or needs. They are not sure how to handle this challenging behavior.

One of the key principles of behavior management is that the best way to stop challenging behavior is to teach better behavior. Children often hear “no”, “stop” and “don’t,” but for them to learn what they should do instead, we must teach them. Punishments not only do not teach better behavior, they often result in a child replacing a negative behavior with another negative behavior. For longer-lasting, positive behavior, we must focus on teaching children how to get their needs met by using acceptable communication strategies or replacement behaviors.

Another key principle of behavior management is that behavior has a purpose and to know which behavior management strategy to use, we must first try to understand what purpose the challenging behavior serves. Look for patterns in this behavior. When does the behavior usually occur? Under what circumstances? Is the child trying to get something? Get out of something? It is important to note that challenging behavior can have multiple purposes. A child might bang his head to get attention or an object, to get out of an activity, to seek sensory input, or maybe because he has an ear infection. Children might use challenging behaviors more when tired, hungry, bored, challenged, or over-stimulated. It is helpful to keep records of what happens before and after the challenging behavior to try to find its purpose.

Using Kayden’s example, you might discover that Kayden tends to bang his head when he wants something but is unable to ask for what he wants. He also bangs his head when he doesn’t want to do an activity anymore, so it seems like frustration and inability to communicate are common factors in his head-banging. His parents, not knowing what he wants, hand him toys and treats to help him calm down because they understandably don’t want him to hurt himself. He finds his head-banging to be very effective to get items and get out of activities, so he continues to do it.

A very effective behavior management strategy is to try to prevent challenging behavior before it happens. In the Winter 2015 issue (“ECI: Strategies to Help Guide Better Behavior”) we discussed effective prevention strategies including:

- maintaining predictable routines

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- using transition warnings
- balancing active and calm activities as well as easy and challenging activities
- watching for cues that a child needs help or is getting frustrated
- using clear language to direct children
- positively reinforcing good behavior

Once challenging behavior is already occurring or has already occurred, additional strategies can be useful. Effective, research-based strategies for teaching better behavior include offering choices, using logical consequences, and teaching replacement behaviors.

Offering choices

Giving children choices helps to increase motivation and allows children to use their communication skills (Green, Mays & Jolivet, 2011). You can allow children to choose between different activities or materials within an activity, for instance. Examples would be choosing between two art activities or choosing two different colors within one art activity. Choices can be offered verbally, in picture form, or using actual items. Pictures and actual items are recommended for very young children and children with cognitive delays (Dunlap & Liso, 2004). Children can choose using the communication skills they have by pointing, using words or signs, using a communication device, or using eye gaze.

To make offering choices work for your family, give two options that are acceptable to you, available, and desirable to the child (Green, Mays & Jolivet, 2011). More options can be provided to children older than five who do not have cognitive delays. Allow the child time to process the choices and respond, keeping in mind that children with delays may need more time to process and indicate their preferences. Offer visuals if the child does not respond to verbal choices. Model making choices if the child still doesn't respond, then prompt the child again to make a choice. Children will sometimes test to see if they can ignore the choices and have or do what they originally wanted, in which case you can either remain consistent with your choices or choose another behavioral strategy. A child may also need help communicating a choice, so work with a speech and language pathologist if you need help with a communication system.

Using Kayden's example, when playtime arrives, Kayden's parents could hold up two items they know Kayden prefers so he can choose one. Another option is to take pictures of Kayden's favorite items and laminate them or put them in sandwich bags to decrease wear and tear. The pictures can be hung on the refrigerator or somewhere Kayden can reach. Please note that for pictures to work, a child must understand the concept of the picture representing the actual item, so pictures of the exact item might work better than graphics pulled from the internet, while actual items might work better than pictures if the child doesn't understand pictures representing the items.

Parents often know which situations or activities are most frustrating for their children, so if Kayden's parents know he tends to get frustrated during speech therapy visits, they and the speech therapist can

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offer him choices of activities that will help him work on communicating, making sure to pick items and activities that interest Kayden.

Logical consequences

Logical consequences help guide more appropriate behavior by letting children face the consequences of their behavior (Fox & Langhans, 2005). For logical consequences to work, the consequence must be clearly tied to the behavior and must happen immediately or soon after the behavior. A note of caution with logical consequences is that children must have the cognitive ability to understand consequences for this strategy to work. Certain conditions, such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, can affect a child's ability to link consequences with their actions, so more repetition or different strategies would be required for the child to learn and the child may not generalize what is learned to other, similar situations.

Logical consequences are most effective when they are framed as guidance, not punishment. Fox and Langhans (2005) state, "the tone of voice used can mean the difference between logical consequences and punishment." One way to frame a logical consequence as guidance is to offer the consequence as a choice, for instance, "to go outside we need to put your shoes on." If the child chooses not to put her shoes on, the logical consequence is that she can't go outside until she does. For very young children or children with cognitive delays, it is effective to use first/then statements such as, "first pick up toys, then draw" or "first shoes, then outside." First/then statements could also be done using pictures or items, for example, "First shoes [hold up shoe], then outside [hold up outside toy or picture of swing set outside]."

Replacement behavior

One of the most effective behavioral strategies to manage challenging behavior is to teach better behavior, or replacement behavior. The replacement behavior serves the same purpose as the challenging behavior, but it is a more positive, less harmful way for children to get their needs met. Since finding a behavior that serves the same purpose is the mission of this strategy, it is important to watch for patterns in the child's behavior and determine what purpose the challenging behavior serves before choosing a replacement behavior.

For this strategy to be effective, replacement behavior must be easily taught, something the child is able to do, easily noticed and reinforced when the child uses it, and it must work quickly for the child (Dunlap & Duda, 2004). Common mistakes are coaching the child to use words that are beyond the child's vocabulary, misinterpreting the purpose of the behavior (for example thinking the child is head-banging to get something he wants when he's really head-banging due to sensory overload), and not making sure the replacement behavior works as well as the challenging behavior. If the new behavior is too difficult or doesn't work for the child, she will continue to use the challenging behavior.

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A useful tip for teaching replacement behaviors is to try to catch the child before the challenging behavior occurs so you can coach a new behavior, help the child use this new behavior, then positively reinforce the child for using it. Positive reinforcement might include praise and making sure the child gets what she asks for (within reason). Olivia is a child who hits her sister and parents. After looking for patterns in Olivia's challenging behavior you find that she tends to smile while hitting, she doesn't seem upset, and nothing seems to occur before she hits to provoke aggression. Because it seems like Olivia is hitting to get her family members' attention and to interact with others, you can help her request to play before she hits someone by coaching using the word or sign for "play" or handing the other person a toy. If she wants the same toy her sister already has, you can help the children play back and forth with the toy or find a similar toy for Olivia to have and at some point they can trade toys.

Using choices, logical consequences, and teaching replacement behaviors requires time and individual attention. Repetition of each strategy is needed for the child to learn from it and start making better choices, but with continued teaching and positive reinforcement of better choices and behavior, most children will show a great improvement in behavior.

Red flags may indicate a need for referral

Sometimes you may need more help figuring out the cause of challenging behavior or strategies to use to help increase more positive behavior. If the child is under the age of three and has any of the concerning behaviors below, call Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) for help with social-emotional development. To find an ECI program in your area call the HHSC Office of the Ombudsman at 1-877-787-8999 and a representative will assist you. Here are some signs that your child might need additional assistance:

- Has tantrums that last 20 minutes or longer.
- Breaks things on purpose.
- Hurts or bites other people or himself.
- Does not look at you when you call his name.
- Does not play with toys.
- Does not engage in any pretend play by 24 months.
- Does not enjoy being around and watching other toddlers.
- Flaps hands, rocks, or sways over and over.
- Does not point at objects she wants.
- Has no words by 12 months.
- Does not notice people or engage in classroom activities.
- Is unhappy most of the time.
- Is anxious most of the time.
- Shows any loss of speech, babbling, or social skills.

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We hope these ideas will help you to work with your child in the pursuit of a cooperative, functional relationship.

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