

Emergency Relief for Teachers of Children Who Challenge

Challenging children can make a teacher's day difficult. These authors share some strategies that can provide "emergency relief" to teachers.

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"I am facing the most difficult year in my 12 years as a teacher. I come home and cry all the time. I am at a complete loss. I have such a passion for my students, but I just don't think I am good enough for this class. It truly makes me want to give up." This real-life situation is often shared by teachers of students who show severe signs and symptoms of impulsivity, distractibility, and hyperactivity combined with frequent, aggressive behaviors including biting and hitting.

How many teachers can identify with this kind of scenario? Such teachers need hope, the kind described by Jerome Groopman (2004), the author of *The Anatomy of Hope*. This book emphasizes that to find hope, discouraged teachers need tools specifically designed to combat their chronic hopeless thoughts with those that help them believe that challenging behaviors can be successfully changed.

Emergency Relief

Teachers of students with chronic challenging behaviors need relief, and they need it quickly. While they may appreciate the sympathy of others, what they really need is some genuine help. The same Noah Principle for students with disabilities described by Dr. Mark Cooper in *Bound and Determined to Help Children with Learning Disabilities Succeed* (2005) must be applied to teachers challenged by chronic misbehavior. The Noah Principle according to Cooper is that there are no more prizes for predicting rain, just prizes for building arks. Cooper writes, "We can no longer afford to walk in waist-deep water in the middle of a storm holding umbrellas over our heads thinking that this will protect and insulate us from the challenges" (xii). Teachers who face huge

behavioral obstacles by students need and deserve more.

There is no quick fix, no magic pill, or no one-size-fits-all strategy. However, there are some helpful practices designed to achieve three goals.

Goal #1: Reduce the frequency of behavior challenges

Goal #2: Shorten the duration of such challenges, and/or

Goal #3: Lower the intensity of those challenges

The elimination of challenges is certainly ideal but we concede that it is probably too idealistic. Still, we have found that the strategies and techniques described in this article have been helpful to many teachers who found themselves in need of emergency relief.

Behavioral challenges must be anticipated and expected.

Teachers of young children are appropriately encouraged to develop and implement appropriate instructional and guidance strategies. At times, however, they are inappropriately misled into thinking that such strategies will help their students behave appropriately. When good, committed teachers work hard to implement strategies steeped in best early childhood practices and still find themselves struggling with inappropriate behavior from the children they teach, they begin to question themselves as viable teachers (Kohler, Cooper, Crow, & Atkins, 2008).



Photos courtesy of the authors

Explicit SEL

Emergency Relief Strategies for Teachers of Children Who Challenge

In this article we share a number of strategies and techniques designed to address the needs of young children who have social skill and self-management challenges. These strategies include the use of:

- Explicit, Direct Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Instruction
- Behavior Identification
- Descriptive Comments
- Visual Cueing
- Auditory Prompting
- Gadget Guidance
- Techno-Guidance
- Interactive Behavioral Picture Stories
- Home Connections
- Integrated Content Area Activities (Crow, & Cooper, 2006; Cooper, Crow, Filer, Murphy, & Benson, 2005; Crow, & Cooper, 2004; Cooper, & Filer, 2003; Cooper, Russell, & Sullivan, 2003).

Explicit, Direct Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Instruction

Early childhood teachers are encouraged to commit themselves to a whole child teaching philosophy, and this includes deliberate, focused attention on social and emotional competencies. Instructional needs of children go far beyond cognitive skills, and children need teachers who are dedicated to helping them learn and use social and emotional competencies in various settings. Just as concerned adults take action to intervene when a child develops a spiked temperature or shows deficits in language or cognitive skills, teachers who face children's challenging behaviors cannot stand idly by and think children's behaviors will change without deliberate plans and follow through to intervene. In its new review of evidence based social and emotional programs for young children and older children alike, the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning indicates an increased focus on programs that "provide explicit SEL skill instruction, teacher instructional practices and pedagogy, and programs that

fully integrate SEL with academic content in specific core content areas" (<http://www.casel.org/guide/criteria.>)

It is important that childhood educators directly teach knowledge and skills important for healthy relationships while concurrently taking care to ensure developmental appropriateness using concrete tools and age-appropriate strategies. Important knowledge and skills include self-awareness, social awareness, emotional management, problem solving, respect and concern for others, and a variety of behaviors that reflect caring, cooperating, sharing, helping, accepting no, waiting for what you want, persisting, and listening. Teachers committed to teaching such competencies can sometimes find themselves overwhelmed. To help them determine what knowledge and skills to teach, early childhood teachers may find the following resources helpful.

Early childhood teachers can and should use *applicable standards for their organizations* to help guide their planning of social and emotional instruction (i.e., Head Start Program Outcomes, state curriculum standards, and Common Core State Standards, especially the Common Core standards related to the Speaking and Listening strand of English Language Arts.)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified key competencies that represent research based categories of skills children need in order to succeed in and out of school environments (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). The competencies are categorized as follows: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

Their website, <http://casel.org/why-it-matters/what-is-sel/skills-competencies>, offers helpful information to teachers working to implement direct social and emotional instruction related to these categories. CASEL identifies clear evidence-based guidelines to assist educators in building and implementing strong, effective social and emotional learning programs (Elias, Zins, Weissberg et.al, 1997.) The guidelines include:

- interactively teaching SEL skills for applications to daily life
- building connections to school through caring, engaging classroom practices
- promoting developmentally and culturally appropriate instruction
- linking SEL across the whole child curriculum
- addressing social and emotional dimensions of learning alongside cognitive dimensions of learning
- involving families
- establishing organizational supports for SEL programs
- providing high quality professional development for staff with sustainable continuous improvement efforts.

CASEL also periodically publishes the *CASEL Guide* that identifies and rates evidence-based SEL programs that are well designed and shown to be effective for advancing social and emotional as well as academic skills in PreK-12 students. For programs interested in exploring various research-based curricula as a framework to more deliberately address social and emotional needs of students, this report can be especially beneficial. The 2013 report can be accessed at <http://casel.org/guide>.



Descriptive Comment

Photo courtesy of the authors

Behavior Identification

Too often students are taught what not to do rather than what to do. Bailey (2001) states, *“What you focus on is what you get.”* She is right. Teachers who exclaim to students, *“Don’t hit!”* teach students what **not** to do. However, the students rarely learn what to do. It is better for teachers to identify the behavior for the students to learn. In a particular case with a teacher who has a student who hits, the teacher should say, *“Johnny, you need to use safe hands when you’re angry. Safe hands stay close to our bodies like this.”* The same can be said for teaching a student who wants what he wants when he wants it. It would help for the teacher to say, *“Johnny, it’s important for you to learn how to wait for what you want. That is called patience.”* Teachers must describe, demonstrate, and encourage students to rehearse/practice those behaviors, as well. When they do, students begin to demonstrate what they know to do rather than remained confused about what they are not to do.

Descriptive Commenting

Deliberate use of positive teacher language is a valuable guidance strategy in itself (Denton, 2013), and the use of Descriptive Commenting is a powerful language tool that can offer the emergency relief that students and teachers need. Descriptive comments are like a play-by-play commentary that describes students’ thoughts, feelings, and actions. Descriptive comments focus on the student and the deed. In response to a student who hits, the teacher may say, *“Trudy, you sure kept your hands safe when Johnny took the ball from you. You are becoming a very safe friend to be around.”* The focus is on the person, Trudy, and the deed – showing safe hands. Such statements both affirm/praise Trudy as well as help her learn the meaning of safe hands and ways to demonstrate safe hands when angry. It is also a good idea to teach students like Trudy to use “I” statements and say, *“I am using my safe hands when angry.”* Again, this form of descriptive commenting helps the students learn what to do rather than what not to do.

Visual Cueing

Visual cueing refers to photos or illustrations designed to encourage or promote the learning of social emotional skills. Too often, children hear the vocal sounds, “*Boys and girls, I need you to show self-control.*” without visual cues that help anchor the encouraging words. Yet, we frequently hear people say, “*Pictures are worth a thousand words.*” There are a variety of learners in our classrooms – auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic. There are many examples of visual cues used to reinforce what we say such as display boards, bulletin boards, and game boards.



Photo courtesy of the authors

Auditory Prompts

Auditory Prompting

Auditory Prompting involves music with educational lyrics that promote learning. Think back to a song played on a repetitive basis. What happens? Very often, the lyrics are played over and over in the mind. During the entire day, you find yourself singing and humming the tune. Auditory prompts are designed to leave students “thinking” about the lyrics using the melody as a magnetic appeal. Students love to sing, dance,

tap their feet, and pretend to play instruments. Auditory prompts help anchor lessons taught. For example, the teacher who wants students to befriend one another can use a song that highlights that concept. Once students become familiar with the song, the teacher can use simply 10 seconds of the song to encourage students to go outside for recess and demonstrate friendliness. There are also songs that represent a wide range of social emotional needs that children have, such as anger manage-

ment, self-control, and believing in oneself.

Gadget Guidance

Gadget guidance involves the use of concrete, hands-on, tangible, manipulative props designed to activate and motivate the students in an inviting way. The teacher may use puppetry, bubbles, toy glasses, telescopes, and so forth for teaching purposes. A teacher may use bubbles for students who want what they want when they want it. An impatient student waiting to pop a slow floating bubble can learn that they can in fact wait for what they want. Young students who often personify inanimate objects are more inclined to show self-control when carrying a stuffed monkey in the classroom, reminding them to serve as a good role model. Play glasses might be a symbol for looking at a problem differently or the mist from a spray toy might be just the way to cool students off when learning to manage their emotions. The point is that high-interest gadgets help motivate students to not only remember what they are learning but also to develop a desire to apply such learning.

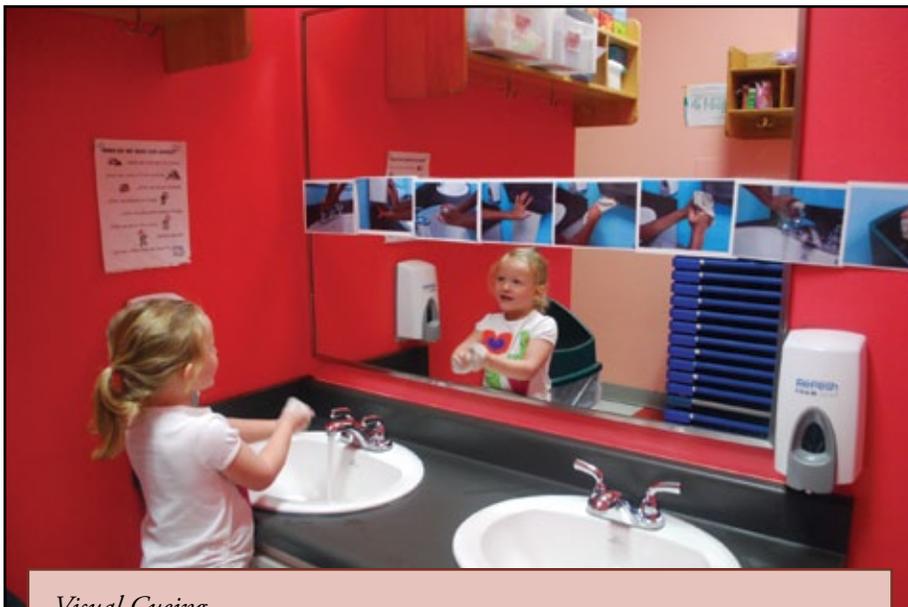


Photo courtesy of the authors

Visual Cueing

Interactive Behavior Picture Stories

Behavior Stories are adaptations of Carol Gray's (2010) social story intervention, developed originally for children on the autism spectrum. Like Gray's social stories, behavior stories are written in child-friendly language and assist children in practicing perspective taking and appropriate social and emotional responses to situations they find confusing or frustrating. Specific to the concrete, experiential needs of young children, Crow (2008) suggests the creation of teacher-made behavior picture stories that are interactive in nature, highlight photos of the child for whom the story is written, and provide interactive, movable parts that enable the child to practice the social skills that are highlighted in the story. Another way to enrich behavior stories for young children is to set them to music. Elizandro, Bramlett & Crow (2012) found that preschoolers with hyperactive and impulsive behaviors were positively impacted when their teachers implemented behavior stories with a music component.

Techno-Guidance

Techno-Guidance is the use of technology (audiotapes, videotapes, YouTube, etc.) that motivates and activates behavior skill development. For example, young children love to watch video clips, especially when they are the actors and actresses. A very effective techno-guidance technique is to capture and videotape the children demonstrating positive behaviors such as caring, helping, sharing, and working. Snapshots of children displayed on the bulletin board are equally inviting and exciting to the children. Children will

Song Selections for Young Children

- *Friends Forever* – Greg and Steve– (*We All Live Together, Vol. V* CD) Produced by Young Heart Music ASIN # B00000DGMT
- *You've Got a Friend in Me* (*Disney's Superstar Hits* CD) Produced by Walt Disney Records, ASIN # B000060P4B
- *I Like You, There's No Doubt About It* – Jean Feldman – (*Dr. Jean Sings Silly Songs* CD) Produced by Progressive Music – ASIN # 028021000120
- *I Can Settle Down Collection* – David Kisor – Produced by Children, Inc. and Kisor Music LLC. ASIN #659696202528
- *Teaching Peace Collection* – Red Grammar – Produced by Red Note Records ASIN # 886146128
- *Believe in Yourself* – Greg and Steve – (*Kidding Around with Greg and Steve* CD) ASIN #6307799595
- *We're All Different and We're the Same* – Jack Hartman – (*Bop, Pop & Hip-Hop in Preschool* CD) – Produced by ASIN
- *Come Join the Circle Collection* – Paulette Meier – Produced by Lesson songs Music. ASIN #B00078GGFS
- *Make a Difference* – Marilyn M. Linford – (*Your World at a Glance* CD) Produced by Marilyn M. Linford.
- *Getting Better at Getting Along Collection* – Jack Hartman – ASIN #B001N46TLG
- *If You're Angry and You Know It* (*Follow a Dream* CD) Produced by Hop 2 It Music ASIN #B0009X6RSC
- *I Can Count on You Collection* – David Kisor – Produced by Children, Inc. and Kisor Music LLC. ISBN 659696202726)
- *It Starts in the Heart Collection*– Jack Hartmann and Becky Bailey – Produced by Hop 2 It Music – ISBN 636723109722



Home Connection

Photo courtesy of the authors

spend much time comparing looks with big grins. The use of animated YouTube stories bring to life talking points that help children embrace characters who show caring, helping, sharing, and so forth. Audiotapes are also useful for teaching positive

thoughts and behaviors. Children become very attentive when asked to “figure out” answers to the two questions, “Who do you hear?” “What are they saying that makes us feel good?” The suspense becomes the leverage for listening.

Home Connection

Effective teachers recognize the powerful influence of strong, clear relationships with families. One way to strengthen relationships and positively influence the generalization of social skills is through the use of planned home connections. For the explicit, direct SEL instruction lessons that directly teach social competencies, extensions can be planned that enable children to practice the skills learned not only at school but also in their homes. Similarly, when teachers create Interactive Behavior Picture Stories, it is suggested that they make copies for the child to take home and share with their families. When teachers make concerted efforts to offer descriptive comments highlighting positive behaviors of children at school, families should know what children are doing right, as well. A dialogue journal or descriptive comment note cards sent home can be helpful in involving families in our social and emotional learning efforts at school.

Integrated Content Activities

Early childhood teachers have a longstanding commitment to integrated curricula that highlight thematic or child-initiated units. These projects integrate learning in various content areas such as science, math, art, drama, literacy, and music. In connection with these unit topics, teachers develop learning centers that extend whole and small group discussions surrounding the topics of exploration. While such integrated units of instruction are steeped in best early childhood practices, they can be improved upon by making explicit efforts at including social and emotional learning in the integrated activities. For

instance, when choosing children's literature to support thematic units and learning centers, there is a vast array of titles that can promote social and emotional learning. Similarly, music, math, and drama activities that support social and emotional learning can be incorporated into almost any unit topic. Perhaps most noteworthy, though, is the reconsideration of the unit topic itself. Often, units are developed around seasonal or topical themes such as pumpkins and scarecrows, farm animals, plants, or robots. While social and emotional learning can certainly be embedded within any theme or project, we suggest creating a unit topic surrounding obvious social and emotional themes, such as kindness, diligence, or friendship. To bring these abstract concepts to a more concrete level, teachers should take care to choose appropriate thematic children's literature, teaching tools, learning scenarios, and examples that reflect real life experiences of young children. Certainly, young children who can and do become engaged in thematic units about topics such as dinosaurs and space exploration can similarly learn about diligence and persistence, but it takes careful planning and experiential learning activities in order for the topics to be meaningful to them.

***It takes time
for behavioral
challenges to
change.***

The use of service learning projects is another excellent teaching strategy to promote such unit topics and help children make clear

connections between social and emotional competencies and other content embedded in the unit (Lake & Jones, 2012). Service learning projects combine learning objectives with service to others in age appropriate ways. For teachers committed to age appropriate, concrete learning that is critical to the education of young students (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2010), developing units with a service-learning component is an ideal match.

All Day, Every Day

For the Emergency Relief strategies described in this article to be used at an optimal level, it is best practice for teachers to use them all day, every day during the early morning greeting, large group time, transition time, snack/lunch time, independent exploratory center time, lunch and snack times, outdoor play, and rest time.

Conclusion

Behavioral challenges to teachers are like fever to pediatricians or broken bones to emergency room doctors. They must be anticipated and expected. Otherwise, an acceptance of the big picture, which includes behavioral challenges, is replaced by frustration and sometimes hopelessness. Preparation for such challenges is critical to a successful environment. In most instances, teachers are prepared to handle behavior challenges. Baumeister & Tierney (2011) suggest that teachers must feel a sense of empowerment and use their willpower to apply skills necessary for the promotion of positive behaviors and the demotion of negative behaviors.

Explicit, Direct Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Instruction, Behavior Identification, Descriptive

Comments, Visual Cueing, Auditory Prompting, Gadget Guidance, Techno-Guidance, Interactive Behavioral Picture Stories, Home Connections, and Integrated Content Area Activities are all Emergency Relief strategies that are difference makers in the lives of teachers and children. They are strategic and must be delivered with precision from the beginning to the end of the day. Just as children can't learn to read overnight but take time to master the skills they need to read, the same children face challenges to master social, emotional, and behavior development and need time and multiple opportunities to learn and practice those skills over time. There are many reasons that explain challenging behaviors. There are just as many reasons that explain why it takes time for such behavioral challenges to change. The use of the teaching strategies described in this article will be the launching pad for happier times for all – children, families, and, yes, teachers.

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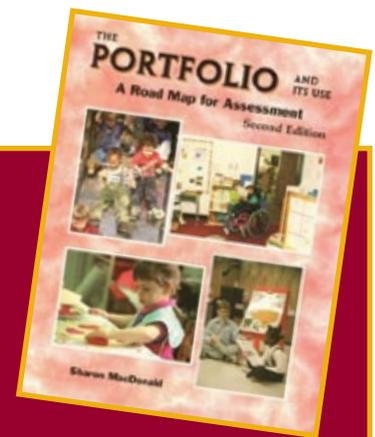
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