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Challenging Behavior in the Classroom: Effective Strategies to Implement to Support the Needs of all Learners in the Early Childhood Special Education Setting

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Abstract

When examining how to meet the needs of children in the Early Childhood Special Education classroom with challenging behaviors, an essential component is addressing the behavior at an early age and preventing challenging behavior in young children. Setting up a classroom environment conducive to learning is essential (Alter & Conroy, 2005). Creating a positive teacher-student relationship creates mutual respect (McGuire, 2017). How educators respond to challenging behavior reflects the overall classroom environment (Strain, 2017). Literature was reviewed in two disability categories, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD), focusing on challenging behaviors in the Early Childhood Special Education setting. I created a handbook full of effective evidence-based practices and strategies for educators to utilize when working with children with challenging behaviors; supporting the students while promoting a positive classroom environment for all learners.

**Challenging Behavior in the Classroom: Effective Strategies to Implement to Support the
Needs of all Learners in the Early Childhood Special Education Setting**

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Literature Review

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that requires a medical diagnosis. The condition is lifelong, and incurable. Social, communication, and behavioral challenges can arise in individuals with an ASD diagnosis (Minnesota Department of Health, 2017). Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder display a vast array of strengths and challenges along a continuum or spectrum. Challenging behaviors are repeated behaviors that impede the learning of a child. For young children with ASD, challenging behaviors include; rigidity in play and movement, difficulty transitioning to activities, and difficulty attending to a task.

Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD) are categorized by an established pattern of one or more emotional responses such as, anxiety or depression, unusual behavior patterns, and aggression or impulsivity (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). Challenging behaviors, such as hitting, throwing toys, and withdrawal from the class can be displayed by a child with an EBD diagnosis. The pattern of emotional/behavior responses needs to negatively affect the academic and behavioral performance of the student, differ from emotional responses of same aged peers, and occur over an extended period of time.

Every behavior has a function or reasoning behind the action. No behavior is random and without purpose. A behavior can meet one or more of the following functional categories, attention, escape/avoidance, access to tangibles, and sensory/automatic. "Once a teacher is able to determine the function of an inappropriate behavior, he or she will be able to

implement consequences addressing that function” (Asltot, 2015). Challenging behaviors in the classroom can occur with any student. Blurting during a read aloud, running around the room, and crawling on top of tables are all examples of unwanted behaviors that can occur in any classroom setting. More severe challenging behaviors such as aggression towards self or others and property destruction can cause sizeable levels of stress for educators. Tips for managing challenging behaviors, including an introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis techniques and evidence-based practices will be discussed.

Least Restrictive Environment refers to the guiding principle from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that states, “students with disabilities [will] receive their education alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate” (IRIS CENTER, n.d.). General education classrooms are not always the right fit for every student. Children with challenging behaviors can be a risk to other students as well as teachers. A self-contained classroom, with less peers and adults may better fit the needs of a student who exhibits highly aggressive challenging behaviors. The child can participate in whole group activities, i.e., physical education, lunch, etc. if deemed appropriate for the child’s needs. Challenging behaviors, i.e., screaming and throwing objects cause a distraction within the classroom environment. It is important to address the student’s least restrictive environment during the creation of the Individualized Education Program.

Review of Literature

When examining how to meet the needs of children in the Early Childhood Special Education classroom with challenging behaviors, an essential component is addressing the

behavior at an early age and preventing challenging behavior in young children. Setting up a classroom environment conducive to learning is essential. “Effective classroom environments begin with a well-organized and engaging classroom that includes developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), activities, and materials” (Alter & Conroy, 2005). For an Early Childhood Special Education classroom, the height of the students should be considered. Setting up materials at the child’s eye level sparks curiosity in young learners. Environmental factors, “such as the lighting, temperature, and noise levels, can reduce the probability of children who engage in problem behaviors due to sensitivity to these environmental factors (e.g., children with autism)” should also be considered (Alter & Conroy, 2005).

Using antecedent interventions, addressing the behavior before it happens, such as limiting the number of children in an activity and establishing routine transitions with a song decreases the likelihood that unwanted or challenging behaviors will occur. Having an effective classroom environment does not negate the possibility of challenging behaviors but supports the child within the classroom to minimize potential challenging behaviors.

The classroom environment requires rules and limits to further decrease the likelihood of challenging behaviors. “Providing rules, rituals, and routines helps provide structure for everyone in the classroom, including the adults” (Alter & Conroy, 2005). Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Emotional Behavior Disorders are best supported with predictability. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, children with ASD may “like routines, order, and rituals.” For a student who struggles with transitions, creating a familiar song or dance to signal clean up, lining up at the door, washing hands, etc. provides a warning that the activity is ending and a new one is going to begin. Modeling, an effective evidence-based practice can be

incorporated into these daily classroom routines, allowing children to see examples and non-examples of appropriate behavior.

How educators respond to challenging behavior reflects the overall classroom environment. When a child is engaging in a challenging behavior in the Early Childhood Special Education classroom, providing positive praise and, “reinforcement to the nearest child who is engaging in the appropriate alternative behavior” is an effective intervention (Strain, 2017). This intervention allows the child to see the appropriate behavior modeled by a peer. By providing attention to the child who was exhibiting the appropriate behavior, the child’s behavioral function of attention is not met. Addressing challenging behavior discretely, without calling attention to the child also provides the child with respect as well.

Appropriate target behaviors should be taught when the child is not engaging in a challenging behavior. According to Strain (2017), “put 95% of your time and attention into the teaching of replacement behaviors and do this when the child is not engaging in the challenging behavior.” Modeling replacement behaviors sets clear expectations in the classroom, fostering effective classroom management. Students with challenging behaviors need to be included socially within the classroom. Social skill development is critical in the early years of learning.

According to McGuire (2017), “the teacher can facilitate the interaction between the child and their peer, helping the child understand how to appropriately initiate an interaction with the peer and how to play with the peer in a way that encourages interactive play.” It is crucial to have a plan created to meet the needs of the students who need additional support.

Consistency and fidelity will support the child. Interventions need to be followed through, sticking to limits and setting consequences that serve the function of the behavior.

Maintaining effective classroom management is supported by a positive teacher-student relationship. Positive environments within the school report lower rates of persistent challenging behaviors (McGuire, 2020). Teachers need to create a relationship with each of their students, pairing themselves with positive interactions to establish mutual trust and understanding. Educators must form a relationship that focuses on the whole child, not just the unwanted challenging behavior being elicited. Within a positive teacher-child relationship, the child should, “feel that the adult is a trusted adult, and the adult shows care towards the child” (McGuire, 2017). If teachers model a warm and accepting attitude, the children in the classroom will observe and repeat this behavior within the classroom environment.

A positive teacher-child relationship correlates to good self-regulation skills and negative teacher-child relationships correlate to poor self-regulation skills in young children. According to Savina (2021), “while students with good self-regulation perform well regardless of the relationships with their teacher, students with weaker self-regulation performed just as well as their peers without self-regulation difficulties, when paired with a supportive teacher.” The teacher is at the center of effective classroom management. A supportive teacher is needed when teaching young children with special needs.

When addressing challenging behaviors in the Early Childhood Special Education classroom, evidence-based practices are essential for effective and developmentally appropriate instruction. Educators have been taught the importance of supporting social-

emotional development in early childhood settings. What happens when behaviors are not addressed in early development? According to Vo (2012), there is a “growing number of young children with chronic problem behaviors that put them at risk for the development of emotional/behavioral disorders.” Emotional Behavior Disorders are defined as a continuous behavior, not derived from life stressors, that includes one or more of the following, anxiety or depression, unusual behavior patterns, and aggression or impulsivity. Behaviors that are not treated with interventions have the possibility of continuing over time without improvements, thus qualifying for Emotional Behavior Disorder (MN Department of Education, 2021).

Conclusion

In an Early Childhood Special Education classroom, effective classroom management sets the stage for positive behaviors, interactions, and relationships with teachers and peers. Utilizing evidence-based practices and addressing the behavior at an early age provides children with effective antecedent interventions that can support their social-emotional development throughout school. Gaps in research include the consequences of not preventing and intervening at an early age when challenging behavior occurs. What happens when the child continues into middle and high school with resolved challenging behavior? Research shows that a child may have a higher risk of developing an Emotional Behavior Disorder if the behavior is not addressed and the child is not supported. Classroom management and evidence-based strategies are successful in supporting students with challenging behavior within the Early Childhood Special Education setting.

Successful Strategies and Evidence-Based Practices to Implement within the Early Childhood Special Education Classroom to Support Effective Classroom Management Handbook



This handbook defines evidence-based practices and strategies that can be implemented in the Early Childhood Special Education classroom. Teachers, paraeducators, and additional school support staff can utilize this handbook to meet the needs of children with challenging behaviors.

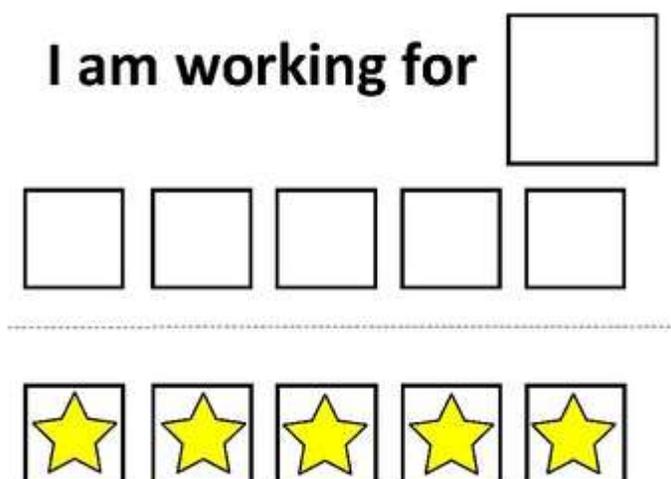
Modeling: An effective evidence-based practice that involves acting out a desired activity or action to teach a new skill.

Modeling can be used to teach social skills such as sharing toys, waiting in line, and completing academic tasks. Modeling supports students by providing them clear expectations for how the activity should be completed (McGuire, 2020).



Token Economy: An evidence-based practice where pennies or manipulatives are placed on one end of a board. For every correct response the child elicits, a penny is moved to the other side of the token board. When the desired number of tokens are acquired, the child earns the chosen reinforcement/reward.

This strategy supports children with challenging behaviors by providing a clear visual depicting how much work needs to be completed to gain access to a preferred activity, such as toys. This strategy also teaches delayed gratification, waiting until the allotted number of pennies are earned before receiving reinforcement. Motivation needs to be established with a preferred reinforcer to motivate the child to complete the work to earn their reward (ABA Educational Resources, 2021).



Natural Environment Teaching/ Incidental Teaching: An evidence-based practice commonly used in Applied Behavior Analysis where the targeted behavior is taught and practiced in the natural environment without prior prompts or directions, following the child's lead (FAU, 2007).

This EBP can be used to teach social skills as conversations and peer interactions occur. If a student is lingering outside of a play group, approaching the student saying, "you can say "can I play with you?" to play with the cars." The instruction is given on the spot, using real-life scenarios to teach problem solving skills.



Pairing: A strategy used by caregivers/teachers that creates a connection between a child's preferred activity and the teacher. This strategy helps develop a positive teacher-student relationship (Barnett, 2020).

Pairing supports students with challenging behaviors by providing them with positive attention and establishing a foundation prior to setting limits. Students need to have a positive relationship with their teachers to gain trust and respect.



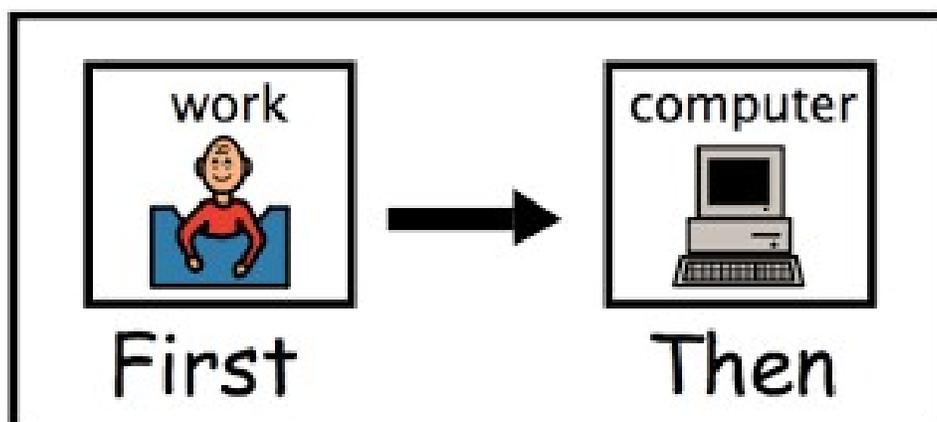
Gaining Attention: Before presenting your student with a prompt, i.e., “write your name” ensure that they are attentive, looking at you. Attention can also be gained by stating the child’s name or a short phrase such as “look” or “eyes.”

Gaining attention is important when working with students with challenging behaviors, ensuring they are displaying skills helpful to learning, such as “eyes watching.” For children who have difficulty attending to a task, gaining attention ensures they are ready to begin and help avoid frustrations when restating the prompt until the child is paying attention.



First, Then Statements: An evidence-based practice that provides the child with clear directions on what is about to occur. This EBP eliminates anxiety about what is happening next while also supporting the child's need for clear expectations. An example would be, "first we wash our hands, then we get snack."

The less preferred option is typically presented before the preferred option, creating motivation. If the child begins to tantrum, screaming, "I want snack!" this EBP provides the child with the reassurance that snack will happen, but first hands will be washed. This EBP also teaches children to, "wait patiently for preferred activities" (Butler & Ostrosky, 2018).



Positive Reinforcement: Providing the student with a reward after completing a target behavior to increase the likelihood of that targeted behavior occurring again. This EBP supports the use of appropriate skills and behaviors (Hardy & McLeod, 2020).

This strategy is often used in Applied Behavior Analysis, providing children with a reward for completing a desired activity. For example, when a child keeps his hands to himself during a shared story, the teacher can praise the child verbally or with a tangible item. The item earned, the reinforcement, is something that the child prefers. This preferred reinforcement increases the probability of the same behavior occurring. If the positive reinforcement is adding something the child finds aversive, the targeted before will not occur again. It is important to know the child's interests for this strategy to be successful over time.



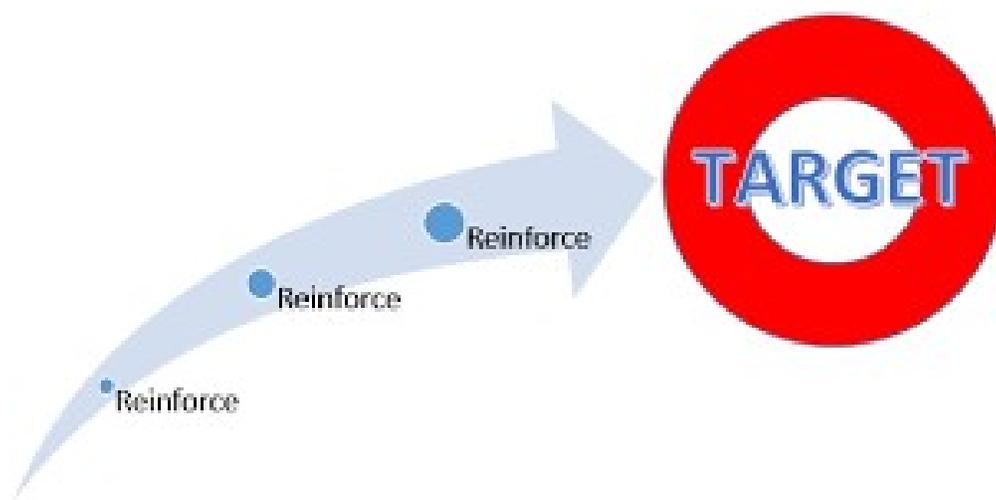
Limit Setting: Creating boundaries or rules within the classroom that provide safety and security (Autism Alliance of Michigan, n.d.).

Setting limits in an ECSE classroom involves boundaries. Children with challenging behaviors need limits to stay safe. An example of limit setting is telling a child who is throwing toys, “if you throw another car, you will be all done playing cars today.” If the child throws another car, they lose the cars. It is important to know that limits must be followed through. Do not set a limit you cannot keep. Make sure limits are appropriate for the age range of the child. In an ECSE room, setting a limit such as, “If you throw another block, you cannot play for the rest of the day” is unrealistic for the setting and age of the child, since most of the day is spent learning through play. Limit setting can be utilized during any unwanted challenging behavior to set clear expectations.



Shaping: A strategy to teach new behaviors by breaking it down into smaller steps and reinforcing partial gains towards the target behavior (Nebraska Autism Spectrum Disorders Network, 2016).

When teaching a child in an Early Childhood Special Education classroom to sit during a story, shaping can be utilized. Instead of expecting the child to sit for the entire two minutes, start with 15 seconds, then 30 seconds, increasing the amount of time until the child is sitting for the entirety of the story. It is crucial that these partial time requirements are praised and acknowledged.



Visual Activity Schedules: Images and pictures ordered sequentially that depict the activities the child will be completing during the day

Visual schedules also support consistency and set clear guidelines of what will happen during the day. Due to difficulties maintaining attention, auditory directions may be forgotten or misinterpreted for children with ASD. Providing visuals will support the student's need for additional wait time when processing information. "Visual activity schedules (VAS) have been well documented for improving engagement, transition, and recreation behaviors with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)" (Zimmerman, 2017).



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