

“O.U.C.H!”

Observe, Understand, Change, Help: Responding to Children with Challenging Behaviors

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World Forum on Early Care & Education, 2005

Across our wonderful diversity of cultures, communities, schools and families, *most* children misbehave *some* of the time. *Most* children also respond to our rules and expectations *most* of the time – sooner or later, more or less as we hope – to an assortment of instructions, reminders, modeling, stories, distraction, praise, rewards, encouragement, reasoning, consequences, even threats or punishments. Some children, however, exhibit more challenging behavior.

A behavior is challenging when it is:

- *persistent or chronic*
- *disruptive for the child and others*
- *possibly threatening or hurtful*
- *not responsive to conventional strategies.*

What are you thinking?!

Has a child's challenging behavior ever left you feeling angry, embarrassed, hopeless, powerless, or disappointed in the child or yourself? The child very likely feels much the same way, regardless of any bravado he might show.

When I think, *This child is making me miserable!* – it is quite easy to act in ways that add to the child's own misery. On the other hand, if I set my mind to thinking, *This is so hard, I know I will learn something from this child!* – the child is more likely to learn, too.

The questions we ask also make a difference:

In the words of Dr. Ross Green,

Instead of asking, 'What's it going to take to motivate this kid to behave differently?'

Ask 'Why is this so hard for this child? What's getting in his way? How can I help?'

Is it due to a Disability?

Challenging behaviors have been associated with several disabilities, including autism, attention-deficit disorder (ADD), hyperactivity, bipolar mood disorder,

depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and more. However, these labels have many overlapping symptoms. They can never completely describe a whole child, or tell the whole story. Identifying each child's unique temperament, differences or deficits provides a clearer path to the understanding needed to come up with effective strategies for both child and caregiver.

Look at all it takes to get along!

- **Language** – *can she understand and use the language(s) needed for joining, cooperating, leaving, feelings, conflict, problem-solving, etc.?*
 - **Social skills** – *does he notice, focus on and respond to social cues and behaviors of others?*
 - **Cognition & Learning** – *can he learn and remember rules and expectations?*
 - **Self-Monitoring** – *does he pay attention to his own actions, energy level, health, & feelings, and adjust to the situation?*
 - **Flexibility** – *Can she adapt to unexpected events? Can she move easily from one place or activity to another? Can she generalize from one event to others that are similar?*
 - **Sense of Time** – *does he seem to live only in the moment or can he look forward and reflect back? Can he delay gratification?*
 - **Impulse Control** – *can he refrain from inappropriate behavior or language?*
 - **Frustration Threshold and Tolerance** – *how easily does she get frustrated? How well does she handle feelings of frustration?*
 - **Physiological Sensitivities** – *does he have issues of health, diet, sleep, stress, allergies...*
 - **Sensory integration** – *How well does she take in and process sights, sounds, textures or movement? Is she over- or under-responsive? Can she block out distractions?*
 - **Moods** – *is the child generally happy, easy-going? intense? sad? irritable?*
- and on...*

Say “OUCH” to challenging behaviors

Observe – Watch the child when he is alone, with different peers and adults, and in many structured and unstructured activities. What times, environments, activities and conditions work for the child? When, where and with whom does the child struggle to get along, and when does he do well? What has happened right before a problem? What happens afterwards? You may wish to keep a journal or checklist about specific behaviors and conditions.

Four year old Michael has a tantrum when he arrives each morning. He grabs toys from other children, kicks, and cries as his mother tries to leave.

Understand – Think about your observations and ask Dr. Green’s question: *What is getting in the way?* Is the child more irritable because of poor diet? lack of sleep? allergies? Is the child over- or under-responsive to sights, noises or movement? Does the child have the confidence and skills for the activities? How does the child handle daily transitions or unexpected events? Consider the many which contribute to a child’s ability to behave.

Michael’s teacher thinks he cannot manage saying goodbye to his mother at the same time he sees other children doing so many things he’d like to do.

Change – When a child struggles to behave, the priority is on change. Involve the child and family as you consider changes you can make in the environment, schedule, expectations, and possibly the social arrangement (seating, group size, caregivers). Can the child take a break when she gets too excited? Will a picture check list help her move through the day?

Michael’s teacher and parents agree that he could arrive ten minutes before the other children. A quiet time to settle in helped calm his morning tantrums.

Help – A child with challenging behaviors may need help to learn new skills or alternative ways to cope with frustration. Other children and adults may need help to understand how he is unique, what his strengths are, and where he has difficulty. The child will need your support to understand himself better and in time learn to manage his own challenges. Offer your help, and realize the opportunity you have to expand your own understanding, patience, skills and compassion.

Michael’s mother gives him a small pebble to hold in his pocket when he misses her. His teacher shares an activity she thinks he’ll like before his peers arrive.

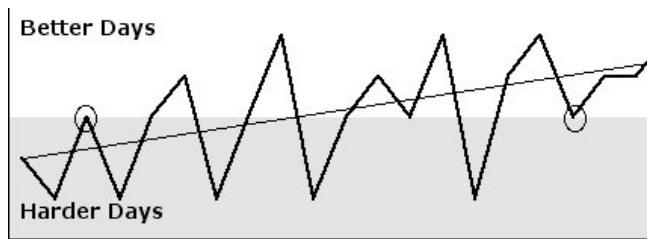
Finally, remember to get the help YOU need to take care of yourself and those affected by the challenging behaviors which exhaust and frustrate us all. You need to stay healthy, rest, eat well, train, strategize, practice and reflect, just as you would for any difficult challenge. You may even want to ask the child’s family and others who care for kids to join your team, and perhaps find yourselves a good coach!

Just remember to say, *O.U.C.H!*

Author’s Note: *I have two perspectives on challenging behaviors. One comes from years of teaching children with autism, related disorders and challenging behaviors, and providing behavioral support & training for families. The other comes from parenting our older son, now 9, who has faced many social and behavioral challenges, especially since kindergarten. I wrote about his kindergarten year in Child Care Information Exchange, August of 2003 (Beginnings Workshop #152).*

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The “Heartbreak Graph”



My son’s principal uses this graph to show how a long-term perspective helps both caregiver and child to see progress! For a few good days, we think problems are past, then a bad day feels like failure. Yet look! Will the child still have bad days? Yes. Are such days as bad as before? Sometimes. So, is the child doing better? YES! Progress is slow, but he has fewer bad days and recovers more quickly.

Resources on Disability & Behavior

Center for the Study of Autism – Resources on autism and related disorders. www.autism.org

***Center for Collaborative Problem Solving** – Directed by Dr. Ross Green, author of *The Explosive Child*. www.explosivechild.com

Kids’ EQ – Focus on emotions and how to help children handle their feelings. Click a face to learn more about its emotion. www.kidseq.com

***Michelle Winner’s Center for Social Thinking** – Develop more understanding and educational strategies for helping people with social thinking or social communicative deficits. www.socialthinking.com

National Resource Center on AD/HD – Attention deficit & hyperactivity resources. www.help4adhd.org

***OASIS** – Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support. www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger

***Parents and Teachers of Explosive Kids** – PTEK, a parent-driven, nonprofit organization providing education and support for caregivers of behaviorally challenging children. www.explosivekids.org

***Sensory Nation** – a comprehensive resource for parents of children with Sensory Integration Dysfunction (SID). www.sensorynation.com

***The Gray Center** – Learn about social stories and other social skills strategies. www.thegraycenter.org

Circle of Friends – A plan to support a child facing school difficulties due to a disability, personal crisis or challenging behaviors. www.inclusive-solutions.com/circlesoffriends.asp