

Troubled Preschoolers Could Make Trouble Later

By JUDITH S. BLOCH

Today, the issue for early childhood professionals is not whether they will work with children with behavior problems and with their parents, but rather how best to do that. The "crisis" of behavior management is having an impact on many early child care and preschool programs. This "crisis" has a number of contributing factors. More typical children have behavioral difficulties, more classified children with disabilities and behavior problems are now "included," and more parents are overburdened and complaining they are unable to control their children. This article will share specific techniques and practical guides designed to enhance a child's capacity for impulse control and self mastery and to promote pro-social behavior and relationships with staff and peers.

Who Are These Children?

A growing population of troubled preschoolers, some who are likely to become violent juveniles, has been identified and described in the literature (Children's Defense Fund, 1994; Public Agenda, 1995). These children have multiple risk factors which include neglect, abuse, and neurological impairment. Some are graduates of a series of unsuccessful foster care placements. Some are in child care as their mothers leave welfare rolls. A Carnegie Corporation report, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children* (1994), documents a frightening pattern. It states:

"Compared with more industrialized countries, the United States has a higher infant mortality rate, a higher proportion of low-birthweight babies, a smaller proportion of babies immunized against childhood diseases, and a much higher rate of babies born to adolescent mothers. Of the 12 million children younger than age three in the United States today, a staggering number are affected by one or more risk factors that undermine healthy development. One in four lives in poverty. One in three victims of physical abuse is a baby younger than age one."

The report concludes that this early adverse environment can compromise a young child's brain function and overall development, placing him or her at greater risk of developing a variety of behavioral

and physical difficulties. In some cases, these effects may be irreversible.


Michael's Story

Michael is the kind of child whom many call difficult. When Miss Debbie had her group of four-year-olds sitting in a circle, mesmerized by the story she was reading with animation and gestures, everyone paid attention. That is, everyone except Michael. As usual, he had trouble sitting still and listening quietly for an extended period of time. Miss Debbie had been able to get him to join the group at the start, but not for long. All her efforts, first to coax and later to direct him back, had been unsuccessful. She was becoming more irritated and annoyed at his behavior and perplexed. She had already paid more attention to Michael than any of the others. What else could she do?

Creating "IEPs" (Individualized Education Plans) for Behavior Management

Since some preschoolers may be very active and distractible and have problems listening, paying attention, or following directions, an individual plan, similar to the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) that is always prepared for a classified child, could help the teacher plan for this kind of child.

Even though Miss Debbie had a plan for Michael, one that would be effective



STOUT
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

COMPETENCIES FOR TROUBLED PRESCHOOLERS ARTICLE

The Child Development Associates (CDA) competency that can be used for this article is:

- To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance.

For more information on the CDA competency requirements, contact the Council for Early Childhood Recognition at (800) 424-4310.

This article helps meet the following Certified Childcare Professionals (CCP) professional ability areas:

- The ability to enhance children's social and emotional development.
- The ability to reliably assess children's development.

For more information on the CCP certification, contact the National Child Care Association at (800) 543-7161.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

with many other children, it did not work in this instance. She needed to expand her repertoire to consider other ways she could help Michael and other children like him become regular participants. How else could she praise or criticize?

First, observe and note the time of day or the activities that seemed to evoke a child's interest, disinterest, and even defiance. Does the child have favorite activities? Do specific events, or time of the day, prompt the problem behavior? Does the child need to be prepared, to know in advance, what is happening next? Is there resistance to group lessons? If story time is the problem, for example, try talking about story time in advance and asking if the child would like to choose the story, sit next to the teacher in the circle, hold the big book open, turn the pages, or show the pictures. The teacher could then identify the child's affective response by saying, "I know it is hard for you to sit at circle time. Could you try a little more?" Is there a story to read that reflects some of a child's difficulties? Could additional enticements, such as cookies, be made available to all children sitting in the circle? This creates another opportunity to help a child join the group, if only to sit for as long as he or she needs to eat the cookies.

If none of the above solutions works, the teacher could stop reading the story, comment on the difficulty the child had joining the group and ask the child why he or she was not sitting and listening. Opportunities to understand and express feelings are also an important part of the curriculum. Activities that require listening or waiting are more difficult for some. When that happens, it may be useful to stop a lesson and direct attention to the child who cannot do this. Whenever possible, a discussion which involves the other children may then become the focus of the "lesson." In this way, all the children in the class benefit from the discussion designed to deal with feelings in order to promote

pro-social behavior. If none of these interventions works, the teacher could help the child find a solitary activity that would not disrupt the story hour. The child may join the group when he or she is ready.

If the teacher can compromise, negotiate, or bargain, both she and the child will "save face" and avoid a confrontation. It is better for the teacher to divert the child's attention or set some contingency that can successfully be met. For example, "Michael, if you can join us for a little while, then you can have a cookie. Or, if you cannot join us, then you can play quietly (or read your own book separately). It's up to you." The child is given a real choice and time to consider and resolve his or her conflict about participation.

Some minor misbehavior or non-compliance can often be totally ignored (e.g., when Michael sits in the circle, he often fidgets and does not seem to pay attention). This behavior can be overlooked if the child does not bother the other more attentive children, and it does not escalate in an effort to elicit even more classmate or teacher attention. Wherever possible, the teacher can comment on the other children's appropriate behavior and even on a difficult child's efforts, if only briefly, to do what is expected. It is always better to avoid lecturing or punishing and to teach what and how to do rather than highlight what *not* to do. In those instances, the teacher can smile, approve, and comment on the interesting question a child asked about the story, or the patience another child showed waiting his or her turn.

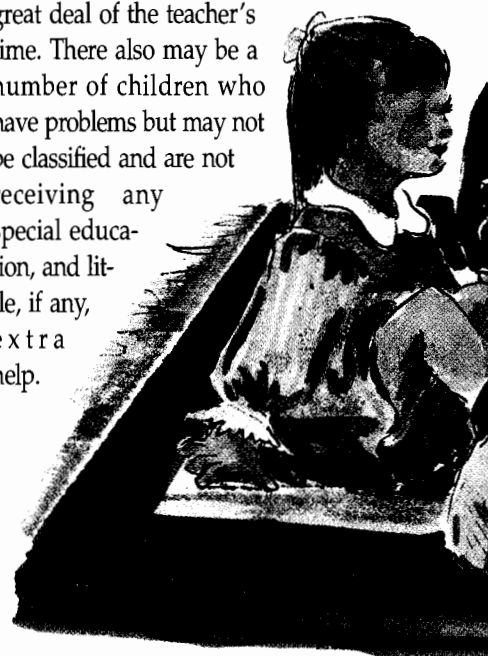
The Therapeutic Classroom

We now have considerable research support for conclusions already arrived at by experienced professionals that the brain is so malleable in the early years that good interventions in a child's settings can undo and overcome bad starts

(Guralnick, 1997). Since quality interventions in early child care and education programs assist in offsetting the negatives associated with certain biological or environmental risks, there are good reasons to improve these services.

Just as work is primary for adults, the center is the child's main experience in life after home. The children's response to their classroom world—adults, peers, specific activities and materials—all provide significant data which enable us to understand them better. Temperament, learning, and coping style, as well as relationship patterns, are all demonstrated in a child's interactions with teachers and classmates. Because a center is real life for children, we have the opportunity to provide experiences and relationships which can alter and shape their behavior and future. Teachers can provide affective, meaningful activities in which children can work out the problems and feelings that interfere with their relationships and learning.

Unfortunately, the reality of some early childhood programs may limit their effectiveness. Classes may be large, despite the fact that they include children who are demanding and take up a great deal of the teacher's time. There also may be a number of children who have problems but may not be classified and are not receiving any special education, and little, if any, extra help.



And, classified children with disabilities and behavioral problems are often placed into the mixture so the early childhood teacher has his or her hands full.

The lack of consistency across programs with respect to the education, training, and experience required of early childhood teachers also presents problems. The literature points out there is a broad range of teacher backgrounds; some have a high school education with little or no experience with young children. Others are certified teachers with a college or graduate school education (Vail, Tschantz, and Bevill, 1997; Butera, 1996; Young, Marsland, and Zigler, 1997). And, even when the teachers are certified, their training may not have included preparatory work to help them deal with young children who present behavior problems in class, the children who are among the most difficult to include (MacMillan, Gresham, and Forness, 1996). One of the most frequently expressed concerns of teachers is the management of disruptive and defiant children when their behaviors

interfere with their learning as well as the efforts of classmates.

As indicated previously, interventions in the classroom can be exceptionally potent because they deal with problems that are emerging as they happen or immediately after the event—not days or even weeks later. While these interventions are powerful, they are not always sufficient. Additional therapy may be necessary for some children and families who will need support and individual counseling from mental health professionals.

Teacher/Therapist

In this model, the relationship of the teacher/therapist to the child is critical and must be established and sustained. Support for this approach is found in the text *Early Violence Prevention* (Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, and Hendrix, 1995). It states that "just as the child must understand that violence toward others

will not be allowed in class, she also needs to know that her feelings and needs are important, the teacher cares about her, and she can learn new ways to solve problems."

There are basic hypotheses to the teacher/therapist approach and the development of a relationship. Some assumptions are:

1. Children need to feel protected and valued and cannot always be expected to earn this with approved behavior (NAEYC, 1991).
2. A relationship with the child is deepened or qualitatively enhanced as a result of the adult's empathic response to the child's distress (NAEYC, 1991).
3. Children will give up unacceptable behavior and even immediate gratification to please a significant



Illustration by Martha Kouatli

adult.

4. Punishments work for the moment but don't necessarily lead the child to self-mastery. Punishment teaches a child what NOT to do, but not what TO DO.

The effective teacher knows that frequent criticism and disapproval may alienate the child, increase his or her dislike of school or even learning. Children, on the other hand, will change their behavior for a beloved adult. But, they usually do this gradually and inconsistently. The teacher has a set of basic guidelines to promote the child's attachment to him or her. These include specific plans to help children increase their ability to master their impulsive and non-compliant behavior.

- **Consistency**—Set clear and appropriate expectations about acceptable behavior.
- **Structure**—Develop routines and predictable schedules.
- **Priorities**—Focus on the important; ignore less important misbehavior.
- **Respond**—Before children misbehave; give choices to prevent problems.

The interventions in the sidebar (p. 14) are implemented at Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop (VPSW) by trained and supervised staff who meet regularly to individualize their implementation. They are offered here to provide a hands-on approach for dealing with difficult children.

What About Parents?

It is easy to develop conflicts with parents when their children present problems in class. Sometimes assumptions are made that parents are to blame because they are too permissive or too strict, or absent and unavailable. "Mother blaming," overtly or covertly, has dominated the dialogue in both the professional and public arena for many years (Bloch, 1997). Mothers are con-

sistently blamed for a wide variety of problems (Bailey, 1994). These attitudes only alienate the adults we need the most, the ones who could become our partners, and who may already be struggling to find ways to manage their child's difficult temperament, or reactions to unsettling life events. It is more productive to seek a dialogue and common ground with parents. We need to share information in order to work together on a modified IEP for the child which reflects priority goals



and planning.

Busy parents may find that sit-down meetings are too difficult to schedule regularly. But, opportunities to collaborate are still possible. Simple, quick exchanges often have significant impact; brief "informal" meetings at pick-up and drop-off times, telephone conversations, plus a regular exchange of notes on progress or plans, and a class newsletter keep the dialogue going (Powell, 1989). In programs at Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop (VPSW), we have found that the process of identifying specific behaviors that are of concern in the classroom and sharing instructional

goals and interventions has strengthened the cooperative link between home and school (Bloch and Seitz, 1989).

Conclusion

We need to remember that the growing population of troubled preschoolers, with a potential for later anti-social behavior (Children's Defense Fund, 1994; Public Agenda, 1995), concerns all of us. A promising approach to this national problem can be found in programs for preschoolers where staff have the skills and attitudes required to deal with these difficult youngsters and an empowerment perspective in work with parents (Dunst and Trivette, 1996).

Judith Bloch, ACSW, is founder of Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop (VPSW). Established in 1966, VPSW was one of the first preschools on the eastern seaboard to identify and educate youngsters with serious learning, language, and/or behavior problems.

References

- Bailey, D.C., Jr. (1994). Working with families of children with special needs. In M. Wolery and J.S. Wilbers (Eds.), *Including children with special needs in early childhood programs* (pp. 23-44). Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Bloch, J.S. (1997). Troubled preschoolers making trouble later: Is there a solution? In A.J. Katz, A. Lurie, and C.M. Vidal (Eds.), *Critical social welfare issue: Tools for social work and health care professionals* (pp. 183-198). New York: The Haworth Press, Inc.
- Bloch, J.S. and Holmes, S. (1998). Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop (VPSW): *Home/school collaborative approach for children with behavior problems*. Syosset, NY: Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop.

- Bloch, J.S. and Seitz, M. (July, 1989). Parents as assessors of children: A collaborative approach to helping. *Social Work in Education*, 11(4), 226-244.
- Butera, G. (1996). *Attitudes of head start teachers towards inclusion of children with disabilities in head start: Effects of training*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University.
- Carnegie Corporation of New York. (1994). *Starting points: Meeting the needs of our youngest children*. New York: Author.
- Children's Defense Fund. (1994). *The state of America's children yearbook 1994*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Dunst, C.J. and Trivette, C.M. (1996). Empowerment, effective help giving practices and family-centered care. *Pediatric Nursing*, 22(4), 334-343.
- Guralnick, M.J. (1997). *The effectiveness of early intervention*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- MacMillan, D.L., Gresham, F.M., and Forness, S.R. (1996). Full inclusion: An empirical perspective. *Behavioral Disorders*, 21:2, 145-159.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1991). Position statement on guidelines for appropriate curriculum content and assessment in program serving children ages 3 through 8. *Young Children*, 46(3), 21-38.
- Powell, D.R. (1989). *Families and Early Childhood Programs*. Research Monographs of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Volume 3.
- Public Agenda. (1995). Kids who commit crimes: What should be done about juvenile violence? *National Issues Forums*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Slaby, R.G., Roedell, W.C., Arezzo, D., and Hendrix, K. (1995). *Early violence prevention. Tools for teachers of young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Vail, C.O., Tschantz, J.M., and Bevil, A. (1997, November/December). Dyads and data in peer coaching. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 49(1), 78-84.
- Young, K.T., Marsland, K.W., and Zigler, E. (1997, October). The regulatory status of center-based infant and toddler child care. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 67(4), 535-544.

**For further information, please contact Judith S. Bloch or Janice L. Friedman at
 Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop (VPSW), 47 Humphrey Drive, Syosset, NY 11791;
 or call (516) 921-7171, Ext. 126; 800-933-VSPW, Ext. 126;
 Fax: (516) 921-8130; E-mail: jfvpsw@aol.com
 You can also visit the VPSW Web site at www.vpsw.org.**

Teaching Strategies and Interventions (Bloch and Holmes, 1998)

Modeling	Teachers and some classmates become models, demonstrating appropriate behaviors. They teach and show children what is expected by the way they behave.	Talking/Listening Chair	An upset child is directed to a "talking/listening chair" in order to have the opportunity to express his or her feelings by talking and putting angry feelings into words. Providing a listening chair assures the child that what he or she has to say is very important and of value to the listening teacher.
Quiet Time	This is a time for the teacher to listen, negotiate, problem solve, and praise the child. Quiet times provide opportunities for the teacher to talk with the child(ren) about problems that occurred; acceptable behaviors; consequences for non-compliant behaviors; and any difficulties that the child(ren) may have experienced.	Special Time	As a preventive measure, a special activity with a favorite adult may be designed for a child who may need extra time in a one-to-one relationship with a caring, supportive adult.
"Catch a Child Being Good"	Teachers seek to "catch a child being good" and reinforce positive behaviors by letting the child know what behaviors please him or her. Comments such as "I like the way Johnny is putting back the blocks..." Useful, too, are notes home commending the child and recognizing efforts, and even small changes.	Options & Choices "It's up to You"	The child is given simple and practical choices as a way of helping him or her to feel in control and also to "save face." "It's up to you" further enables the youngster to feel he or she is in charge of him- or herself and capable of making a decision.
Voice Disapproval	Teacher says: "You may not hit! I won't let you hurt any one, and I won't let anyone hurt you."	"We Need to Stop and Listen to..."	Planned lessons "stop" a child whose emotional state is so important that it needs to be addressed immediately. When children cue into these words, we need to stop and listen. They see themselves as valued and important. Classmates often become part of the problem solving strategies that usually follow.
Reinforcements	A reinforcement is any event following a behavior which increases the frequency of the behavior. Continuous reinforcement is rewarding a child each and every time he or she performs appropriately. Intermittent reinforcement rewards the child on an intermittent or partial basis.	"He Said, She Said."	The child is given the opportunity to be a part of a process
Reward Good Alternate Behavior	Pinpoint the undesirable "target behavior" you wish to eliminate. Identify the desired appropriate behavior you wish to enhance. Offer praise and rewards each time that behavior is displayed. For example, if the undesirable "target behavior" is screaming, reward the alternate behavior of talking in a normal tone of voice.	What Do We Do?	that enables him or her to be heard and also to listen. Negotiating, problem solving, and conflict resolution are encouraged. (This is particularly useful when two children are fighting.)
Planned Ignoring	Planned ignoring, not of a child but of a behavior that is inappropriate (but tolerable), is a very effective technique. The ignoring must be planned and consistent (e.g. Johnny's hitting is unacceptable, but Johnny's moving back and forth in his chair is tolerated).	Depersonalizing/ Addressing Children in the Third Person	This method is a non- or less threatening approach for some children. Rather than using a child's name, the teacher may say: "When children are ready, we can _____."
"Use Your Words"	Teachers will say, "Use your words," prompting the child to verbalize. The child is encouraged to put his or her angry feelings into words, rather than fists. Usually this is said to an angry child who may hit or hurt someone else.	When...Then	This strategy sets up a contingency. It is based on the assumption there is an adult expectation for appropriate behaviors and that the child has the ability to comply. This contingency serves as a reinforcement. "When you finish _____, then you may _____."
Re-Directing	Re-direction is often a quick and effective technique when a child displays unacceptable behaviors. The teacher suggests another activity instead of telling the child "stop" or "don't."	Consequences Related to Behavior	If the child makes a mess, the child should clean it up (even if the helping teacher does most of it).
Staff Dialogue	Teacher dialogues (talks with another staff member about appropriate behaviors/activities, etc., without addressing the child). Many children when "out of control" will respond to this technique since it enables them to hear what is expected and appropriate without feeling criticized. This gives the child more time to understand alternative and acceptable ways to act. It also enables a child to "save face."	Physical Outlets	The child who is angry and not yet able to verbalize his or her distress and anger may need a place to release and vent energy and to be physically active in a playground or gym.
		Waiting/Helping Chair	The upset child who cannot participate in the classroom program is directed to a "waiting or helping chair," enabling him or her to have a place to observe the group and calm down.
		Time Out Chair in Classroom	The upset child may need a few minutes away from a difficult situation, but close enough to the group to return to activity when he or she is able.