Dealing with “difficult children” in preschool/infant settings

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What is a “difficult child”? 

- “DISRUPTIVENESS”
- A child who is very active, inattentive and is constantly “on the go”
- A child who makes a lot of noise, who talks very loudly, talks all the time
- A child who interrupts constantly, requires a lot of attention and interaction
“difficult child…”

• OPPOSITIONALITY AND DOMINANCE
• A child who does not heed admonitions
• … very persistent and determined
• ….does not follow instructions
• ….wants to determine what will happen
• ….deliberately does the “wrong thing”
“difficult child”

• EXPLOSIVENESS
• Easily loses control and becomes angry
• Cannot be calmed once angry or crying
• Throws temper tantrums frequently and of long duration
• Does not seem to learn from previous experience .. Has no patience
Difficult child

• ANGRY AND AGGRESSIVE
• Tries to dominate others, I.e. grabs toys, pushes, hits, bites, kicks other children
• “takes on” adults who transgress his/her expectations (kicking, biting, etc.)
• Makes negative comments, curses, uses “foul language” toward people.
Other difficult children

- The child does not participate in activities, is very inattentive, wanders around
- Unable to focus on one activity for a short period
- Is excessively shy and inhibited
- Appears depressed and withdrawn
How to deal with the difficult child?

• Different strategies, modes of thinking, “schools of thought”
• CONTINUUM FROM
• Very behaviorally oriented programs
• to
• Psychodynamically, “in depth” models (e.g. attachment, emotional life, etc.)
Strategies

• Balancing the interests of the
• Staff…..staff needs
• Other children…. Children’s needs
• Needs of the individual “difficult” child
• CAN THE NEEDS OF THE CHILD BE MET IN THIS SETTING?
Strategies

• NEEDS OF THE STAFF.
• Can the staff deal only with “good children”?
• Can the staff deal with more active and restless children?
• Can the deal with angry and aggressive children?
Strategies...staff

- Staff’s training and ability to observe
- Staff’s interpretation and understanding of development
- Knowledge of emotional life of children
- Awareness of the long-term goals of development vs. “here and now”
Barriers to dealing with difficult children.

- Traditions and beliefs about “misbehavior”
- “culture” of day care settings and other educational sites
- Emphasis in the “here and now”, present
- Emphasis on “what works” behaviorally vs. what is the best interest of the child
- Emotional pain and memories of childhood
Less useful practices

- One approach “fits all children”
- Purely ‘behavioristic” approach (missed opportunities)
- Repetitive use of strategies that are not useful and do not lead to growth
- Negative climate in the setting…”putting out fires” vs. enjoying children
Less useful practices

- Repetitive use of “time outs” many times a day
- “sad faces” day in and day out, at the end of the day
- “stand in the corner”
- “holding” repeatedly in an aversive manner
Model of intervention

• 1ST. OBSERVATION OF THE BEHAVIOR

• 2ND UNDERSTANDING OF THE BEHAVIOR. POSSIBLE “THEORIES”

• 3RD EXPLORING WHAT FITS THIS CHILD FROM A DEVELOPMENTAL POINT OF VIEW.
OBSERVATION of difficult behavior

- Behavioral analysis of the problem
- When does it happen?
- What seems to precipitate it?
- What seems to maintain it?
- How severe or important is it?
- Is it purposeful or involuntary?
OBSERVATION

- Does something trigger the behavior?
- Is it associated with particular states of the child? (e.g. sleepy, tired, hungry, overstimulated, afraid, frustrated)
- Does the behavior occur in all settings or only in some?
- Does it have to do with a relationship?
OBSERVATION

• Is the behavior old or new?
• Is it related to particular stressors or events in child’s life?
• Is the behavior “typical” of this child?”
• Is it in response to event? (move, birth of sibling, marriage, divorce, visitations, etc.)
OBSERVATION

• What are typical sequences of behavioral interaction in this behavior?
• Is the child trying to communicate some specific need?
• Is the behavior just an expression of “who the child is?”
UNDERSTANDING

• Where does this behavior fit in the picture of the “total child”

• **Total child:** - developmental levels: **PROFILE**
  - sensory integration
  - motor skills
  - language
  - interpersonal/relational abilities’
  - emotional development.

  - cognitive development/ play patterns.

  **ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**
Child Influences..
Cognitive development

LANGUAGE. Receptive, expressive

MOTOR dev. Fine and gross

EMOTIONAL. Attachment, anxiety

SOCIAL dev. Reciprocity, relatedness

Development of IMAGINATION, play patterns

Sensory integration style
UNDERSTANDING

• Young children are very reactive to stressors
• Young children commonly have “regressive behaviors” in response to stress
• Regressions are transient, minor and signal distress and need for comfort, containment and help
Understanding

• Is the behavior the result of the child’s temperamental style?
• Is it the result of challenges in development/ I.e. delay or deviation?
• Is behavior due to sensory overload or overstimulation?
• Is behavior due to lack of stimulation and attention?
Understanding

• Young children are “designed” to want attention constantly
• Young children are “like opera characters” (A. Freud): experience a range of intense emotions (jealousy, sadness, fear)
• Young children are sensitive to separations
• Young children believe in magic.
Understanding: young children

Struggle for self control
Do not understand complex time statements.
Do not understand very complex language:
  e.g. “appropriate/inappropriate”
Do not “take a mile when given a foot”

Do not want more and more attention..ad infinitum

Do not want to stay behind and be extremely dependent
Understanding young children

• Young children imitate those around them
• ...caregivers... older siblings... other children... television characters...
• Child care workers
• Positive reinforcement tends to work better for most children... motivation factor

• **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP IS A STRONG MOTIVATOR**
INTERVENTIONS

• What “works” extinguishing a behavior may work at a high price for the child.
• What extinguishes a difficult behavior is not necessarily adequate for the child’s emotional life (e.g. crying intensely on separation from parent)
• *Controlling behavior is not the goal of caregivers*
Purpose of intervention

- Promoting the child’s development
- Promoting the child’s learning of self-control, modulation, regulation.

Promoting a healthy dependence on adults
Promoting an attachment relationship to caregivers
Feeling secure in relationships
The Angry Child

• Irritable, easily frustrated
• Wants to be the “bad guy” and feels successful if “bad”
• Easily gets angry and explodes
• Makes threats, negative comments, is punitive and negative
Angry child

- Not every infraction has to be followed by a punishment or negative consequence
- The purpose of the discipline is to help the child change strategies of coping, not to punish
- The goal is to help child deal with frustrations differently.
Angry child

- Hitting is “programmed” primate behavior
- Also pushing, biting, grabbing and showing dominance behaviors.
- Child should be assisted to understand the problem in hitting, to develop compassion, internal controls and mechanisms to express anger (more adaptive)
Angry child. strategies

- Talking to the child. Reasoning if possible
- Eliciting compassion
- Suggesting alternatives.
- Showing effectiveness of new response
- Cognitive and behavioral techniques (dolls, puppets, enactments – role playing)
Angry child, strategies

- Positive reinforcements
- Catching the child doing the right thing
- Social reinforcement making desirable more adaptive behavior
- Containing expressions of anger (not counter-attacking)
- Maintaining kind and firm stance in limit setting
Angry child, strategies

- Understand reason for anger
- Are there “ecological factors”, i.e. should the child be angry?
- Talking about angry feelings after the event where child lost control
- Processing when child is calm, and suggesting other ways of coping.
Angry child, strategies

- Punishment is less important than working together to change
- The adult becomes more a “coach” than the person to be feared, avoided
- Team work to learn new things
- Importance of attachment relationship, positive tone and encouragement.
Explosive child

- Help child feel contained, empathized with and accompanied
- Analyze what brings on the explosions
- Help child be prepared
- Try to “preempt” those explosions
- Process the explosion after it is over.
Explosive child

- Help contain the child
- Self soothing, massage, deep pressure, rocking, vestibular stimulation
- Distraction, engagement in something else
- Use humor if possible
- Respect for the child’s difficulty in regaining control
- Containment, not ignoring.
Defiant child

- Understand child’s need to feel “in control”
- Is child imitating someone?
- Is child reenacting scenes from past or present?
- Is child feeling out of control?
- Is child “dominant and intense?”
Defiant child

• Help child feel he/she is in control
• Games where the child is “the boss” or where there is a sense of being in control
• Role playing, playing with dolls/puppets
• Pretending to be the father, the teacher, the policeman, etc.
• Games where child dictates the rules and wins.
Defiant child

- Avoid if possible face to face confrontations
- Try to help child go in a certain direction, using diplomacy
- Show respect and help child understand gradually other persons’ point of view
- Praise when child “allows” others to have a say on things.
Non compliant child.

• Understand why child is so “autonomous” and does not work as a partner
• Ensure one gets the attention of the child before giving “instructions’
• Observe whether child really understands language.
Non compliant child

- Use a low voice and try to have child look at you
- Use touch as an aid to convey the request or instruction
- Use a soft tone of voice
- “accept defeat” and give further chances
- Not engage in battle of wills
- There is much time to learn skills, it does not have to be this time
Disruptive, noisy and hyperactive

- Try to understand purpose of the intense behavior
- Difficulties in self-modulation?
- Repeating “chaos at home”?
- Seeking stimulation to stay aroused?
- Trying to elicit attention from adults?
Disruptive, hyperactive child

- Help child to not become overstimulated
- Give breaks from time to time from stimulation
- Give opportunity to expend his/her energy
- Help child to regain control (bean bag, tent hammock, massage, etc.)