

Dealing with “difficult children” in preschool/infant settings

Martín Maldonado MD

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- Appears depressed and withdrawn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***

CULTURE

stressors

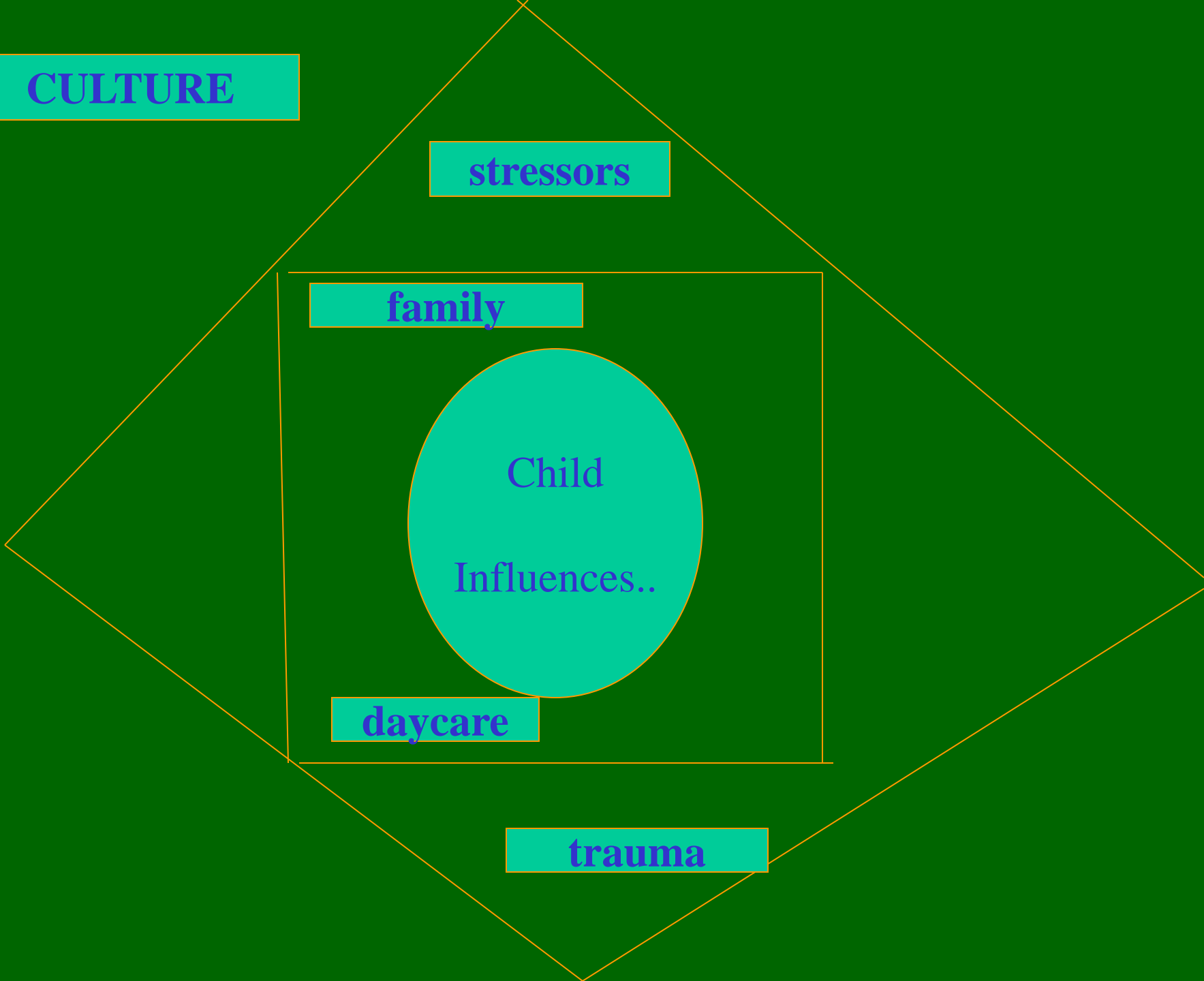
family

Child

Influences..

daycare

trauma



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

DEVELOPMENTAL PROFILE

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, pupppets, 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.)