

Challenging Behaviors and the Role of Preschool Education

by Lisa A. McCabe and Ellen C. Frede

Some research suggests a rise in challenging behaviors among children in early care and education. Among the findings are a high rate of removal from preschool classrooms for behavior problems, a possible link between early non-maternal care and aggressive behaviors in preschool, and concerns from teachers that too many children arrive at school without the social skills required to learn.

This begs the question of the role preschool education plays in regard to problem behaviors—whether under certain circumstances it is a contributing factor or whether it can in fact provide positive experiences that lead to a reduction of challenging behaviors. This fact sheet reviews the research in order to answer these questions and makes recommendations that can lead to better behavioral outcomes.



Preschool Policy Facts

Policy Facts series edited by Ellen C. Frede, Ph.D., and W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D.

National Institute for Early Education Research

www.nieer.org

RUTGERS
Graduate School of Education

What We Know:

- A challenging behavior is any repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with learning or engagement in social interactions. This includes unresponsiveness to developmentally appropriate guidance and actions such as prolonged tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, disruptive vocal and motor behavior, property destruction, self-injury, noncompliance, and withdrawal.
- Challenging behaviors during the preschool years constitute one of the strongest predictors of later, more serious problem behaviors including delinquency, aggression, antisocial behavior, and substance abuse.
- Participation in early care and education is sometimes linked to higher rates of challenging behaviors, especially in programs of lower quality that do not specifically address the social development needs of young children.
- High-quality preschool education that includes an emphasis on children's social development can reduce rates of challenging behaviors and serve as a long-term protective factor for children at risk for developing challenging behaviors.

Policy Recommendations:

- High-quality preschool education should be provided so all children have the opportunity to develop positive social skills.
- Teacher training and technical support in the area of children's social and emotional development and classroom management should be provided, ideally on an on-going basis.
- No preschooler should be expelled from an early childhood program. With the right supports for teachers and a differentiated approach that provides additional layers of the "teaching pyramid" for at-risk children, this ultimate form of "discipline" can be prevented.
- Universal, classroom-based curricula that include social skills teaching should be viewed as the base tier of a teaching pyramid that serves all children. Children who struggle with challenging behaviors should receive additional tiers that provide intentional teaching of social problem-solving and other pro-social skills as well as interventions from experts and family members as needed.
- Developmentally appropriate screening for early identification of problems is essential.

Prevalence, Development and Trajectory of Aggression

A growing body of research points to links between challenging behaviors in early childhood and later negative developmental and social outcomes. Yet, it is important to note that not all children who exhibit problem behaviors in early childhood maintain these behaviors over time. Work from the large-scale National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care identified five typical trajectories of aggressive behavior. Three of these trajectories involved moderate to high levels of aggression at some point, but only a small portion of children followed a path of high and sustained aggression levels to third grade.

Additional evidence for a possible link between preschool experience and challenging behaviors comes from work examining cortisol, a hormone serving as a measure of stress, in children in child care. A review of nine studies found a rise in cortisol in children who are in group care settings when compared to children in home care. This finding suggests that when behavior problems are detected in preschool settings, they may be due in part to children's difficulty coping with social pressures in a group setting for extended periods of time.

Researchers studying the high-quality, comprehensive Abecedarian program documented an increase in behavior problems in program participants once they reached elementary school when compared to the children who did not attend. Developers responded by revising the curriculum to focus more on social skills development and support for teachers. The increase in challenging behaviors was not found once these changes were implemented.

A recent large-scale investigation examined the troubling practice of

removing children from preschool classrooms. The study found the removal rate of preschoolers is high compared to rates for K-12 students. This raises concerns about challenging behaviors.

Preschool Education as an Ameliorating Factor

Serving as a counterbalance to the evidence suggesting that preschool participation may contribute to the development of challenging behaviors is a wealth of research showing appropriate preschool education can actually serve as an ameliorating factor for children at risk of developing such behaviors. Long-term follow-up data from high-quality early education programs for high-risk children, such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, showed a reduction in adolescent and adult crime rates for those who participated in the programs as opposed to those who did not participate.

A national randomized trial of Head Start found that one year of the program reduced behavior problems and hyperactive behavior for 3-year-olds, but did not find statistically significant effects for 4-year-olds. Similarly, a national evaluation of the Early Head Start program found that participants showed less aggression at age 3 than control group children. In a large-scale study of nearly 3,500 Canadian 2- and

3-year-olds, researchers found that aggression was significantly higher in children from high-risk families who are *not* in child care when compared to the child care group.

Important Components

Studies to date suggest commonalities among approaches to addressing children's social needs. First, comprehensive curricula that embed social skills appear to be effective. Enhanced development of language skills, executive function, awareness of emotions, and social skills together may contribute more to improved social behavior than targeting challenging behaviors in isolation.

However, more targeted approaches must be geared towards meeting the needs of children who struggle with behavioral challenges. Fox and Lentini's Teaching Pyramid is useful in this context. The base of the pyramid emphasizes the development of positive relationships with all children, the next level focuses on the needs of at-risk children, and the top of the pyramid includes more intensive procedures for individual children with persistent behavior challenges. The key point is that both general and targeted strategies are needed in any early education setting.

Related to this differentiated approach is the need for appropriate developmental screening. It is critical to identify at-risk children early so that targeted approaches can be implemented early in a child's life. Providing technical support for teachers when implementing any strategy is important. Having access to a mental health consultant can also be useful for teachers.

In the final analysis, the issue is not whether preschool education is "good" or "bad" in regard to challenging behaviors but whether it is geared to the social-emotional needs of children.

