

Michelle Salcedo, M.Ed.

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UNCOVER THE ROOTS of Challenging Behavior

Create Responsive
Environments Where
Young Children Thrive

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Foreword by
Sandra Duncan, Ed.D.

Praise for

UNCOVER THE ROOTS of Challenging Behavior

“This book is a must-have for all early education professionals! It is an accessible, comprehensive primer for those new to the field, giving you a wealth of both proactive and reactive strategies and resources that will create a successful, thriving community of young learners. Experienced educators will also find the book solidly grounded in well-established theory and research but written with a fresh voice that will provoke your thinking, provide new ideas, and add value to your classroom practices. If you follow Ms. Salcedo’s sound advice, your ‘garden’ of seedlings will surely blossom and grow. Highly recommend!”

—**Richard Cohen, M.A.**, international early education motivational speaker and consultant

“All teachers struggle with behavior issues that perplex them—what to do when Johnny won’t sit at circle time, when Meg lashes out, when Enrique keeps disturbing his classmates. *But what if we could create classroom environments that help prevent these behaviors from happening in the first place?* With this important book, early childhood expert Michelle Salcedo offers specific, carefully considered, research-based strategies and ideas that will make your classroom as effective, responsive, and joyful as possible . . . an abundant garden of blooming possibilities!”

—**Diane Ohanesian**, early childhood development specialist, former editor-in-chief of *Early Childhood Today*, and author of *Hugga Bugga Love*

“Early care professionals spend an exorbitant amount of time brainstorming appropriate responses to inappropriate behaviors displayed in the classroom. *Uncover the Roots of Challenging Behavior* is an excellent tool that can be used to support the paradigm shift from reactive to proactive classroom guidance. Michelle Salcedo captures the transition from theory to practice by identifying essential components needed to support students through a vulnerable stage of development. Teachers walk away with specific strategies that can be immediately used in the classroom.”

—**Sheila Lewis, Ed.D.**, early childhood educator

“*Uncover the Roots of Challenging Behavior* is one of those books that will be looked at frequently. It does a marvelous job simplifying why challenging behaviors occur and the best ways to prevent them. Informative and engaging, the ideas can be used immediately. Everyone should keep this book where you can pull it out for a quick solution.”

—**Daniel Hodgins**, author of *Boys: Changing the Classroom, Not the Child* and *Get Over It! Relearning Guidance Practices*

“Helping young children develop into socially competent and caring adults starts early. In *Uncover the Roots of Challenging Behavior*, Michelle Salcedo provides a wealth of information for teachers at all levels. She includes strategies for establishing the classroom environment and effective guidance techniques for teachers to try in their own classrooms. Teachers will find her ideas, charts, and stories helpful for not only critically examining their own behavior, but also working to develop the key relationships and appropriate learning settings that truly help children thrive.”

—**Karen Menke Paciorek, Ph.D.**, professor, Early Childhood Education & Children and Families at Eastern Michigan University

“If you are seeking practical, specific, and supportive ways to create classroom environments, step right this way. In *Uncover the Roots of Challenging Behavior*, Michelle Salcedo reminds us behavior is a powerful form of communication. She provides practical suggestions and concrete examples on how to create classroom environments that support educators in hearing this communication and meeting the often unmet needs of children.”

—**Brigid Beaubien, Ph.D.**, professor, Teacher Education, Eastern Michigan University

“This book offers a variety of ways to address challenging behavior: analyzing your environment, evaluating your schedule and materials, and offering suggestions about how you build relationships with children in your care. Most importantly, Michelle Salcedo encourages us to ask the question, ‘What are children telling us with their behavior?’ As you uncover the answers to that question, you can help find ways to ensure each child feels safe, valued, and heard.”

—**Sandra Heidemann, M.S.**, coauthor of *The Thinking Teacher: A Framework for Intentional Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom*



UNCOVER THE ROOTS of Challenging Behavior

Create Responsive Environments
Where Young Children Thrive

Michelle Salcedo, M.Ed.



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Note: The names of teachers and children who appear in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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(612) 338-2068

help4kids@freespirit.com

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Dedication

To my friends and family, near and far, of blood and of heart. You know what you've done and you know who you are. Thank you for being in my life.

Especially to Nacho, Christian, and Sheridan—my rocks of endless love and support.

Acknowledgments

Many influences have shaped my professional journey and ultimately have led to this book. It would be impossible to thank everyone, but please know that I hold you all dear.

Thank you to Bill Weld-Wallis, who many years ago invited me into this realm of early childhood education.

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Thank you to Sandra Duncan, who helped me discover this enchanting world of early childhood writing and who has been one of my most ardent advocates ever since. Thank you for putting your support and wisdom into writing the foreword to this book.

Thanks to my editor, Meg Bratsch. You got me into this, and you have managed to get me through the process with grace and patience. This book is so much better because of your influence.

Thanks especially to all the early childhood professionals who, every day, care for and educate our children. I know that the world will be a better place tomorrow because of the work you do today.

Thanks to my parents, Art and Joan, who taught me that it is possible to live in accordance with one's principles.

Finally, I would like to thank the children. You fill the world with joy, laughter, and energy—thank you for letting me be part of your world, even for a moment at a time.

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Foreword

Who doesn't love receiving gifts? My mom's favorite gift was fresh flowers, especially pink roses—so naturally that was my dad's go-to present for her birthday, their anniversary, or Valentine's Day. On one special occasion, my dad veered away from the standard gift of fresh flowers and surprised her with a small rose bush, which he carefully planted beside the back door of the house. Mom was thrilled and delighted with the bush of tiny pink roses. Unfortunately, the little rose bush didn't make it past the second growing season. Although dismayed, Mom decided to learn all she could about growing roses. She read books, talked with neighbors, and visited the local nursery. A transformation slowly took place: She became *more* than a lover of roses—Mom became a gardener. She found a better spot in the yard with more sun, prepared the soil, and provided the right nutrients. Although it was challenging, she worked hard . . . and the result was healthy, thriving rose bushes filled with gorgeous and grandiose roses. For the roses to thrive, Mom learned it is important to fix the environment in which the roses grow—and not the roses themselves.

The book you are holding in your hands encourages you to follow in my mom's footsteps: Become a gardener. As you work with young children—especially those exhibiting challenging behaviors—begin by making changes in the classroom environment rather than focusing on or trying to fix the children. Understand classroom factors that can contribute to challenging behaviors and learn strategies to reduce the likelihood children will act out in your classroom. Learn how you can create learning spaces responsive to the developmental needs of young children. Be proactive and not reactive. Discover a comprehensive approach to fixing the classroom environment to prevent and address young children's challenging behaviors.

Just like my mom, you can be a superb gardener—only your garden is the classroom and your roses are the children. *Uncover the Roots of Challenging Behavior: Create Responsive Environments Where Young Children Thrive* is a groundbreaking perspective on understanding how classroom environments impact children's behaviors. This powerful book offers many proactive strategies you can use to reduce challenging behaviors simply by changing the classroom environment. By telling real-world stories based on her vast experiences working with young children, author Michelle Salcedo illustrates compelling and thought-provoking ideas and valuable concepts. Packed with easy-to-understand and ready-to-use tips and advice, this book is bound to become a favorite and treasured resource for all early childhood gardeners.

Sandra Duncan, Ed.D., early childhood educator and coauthor of *Bringing the Outside In* and *Inspiring Spaces for Young Children*



Introduction

In the early 2000s, I served as the lead teacher and training director of a small nonprofit early learning center in northwest Detroit. A determined executive director had recruited me with the words, “These children need you, Michelle.” Over the years, the center had become a final refuge for children who had been expelled from other facilities due to challenging behaviors. The director didn’t know how to support these children, but she firmly believed that they were too young for the world to give up on them. So there I was, in a classroom with twenty-five children, age two-and-a-half to five, many of whom had been removed from at least two other programs before passing through our doors. What I saw were very young kids who were trying to make sense of their worlds. For many, the circumstances of their current lives made it very difficult to be in a learning center environment. The structures and expectations of a toddler or preschool classroom were too much for them, so they lashed out with problem behaviors that signaled their frustrations or feelings of inadequacy.

The scenes I saw every day may feel familiar to you, as an early childhood educator:

A boy, angry because he doesn’t want to clean up, picks up a chair and throws it across the room.

A girl, resistant to taking a nap, begins hitting other children lying peacefully on their cots.

A preschooler, frustrated with the expectations of circle time, runs around the classroom, screaming and pushing over shelves.

In early childhood classrooms across North America, situations like these play out repeatedly. Teachers become increasingly frustrated as they struggle to help children with challenging behaviors integrate into the classroom community while fearing for the physical and emotional well-being of the other children.

Most teachers choose the field of early childhood education because they want to make a difference in children’s lives. However, many report that they feel unequipped to handle instances like those just described. Teachers are often overwhelmed and feel helpless in the face of these challenging behaviors. Families are frustrated, are embarrassed, and may feel judged for not being able to “fix” their children. Directors, trying to balance the needs of an individual

child with those of their staff and the other children, may resort to expelling a misbehaving child from their programs.

There is increasing focus on the rate at which our youngest learners are being expelled from preschool programs.¹ Some reports show that nearly seven out of every thousand children are expelled at least once from a preK classroom. This is more than three times the rate for higher grades.² And data show that these expulsions impact boys, especially minority boys, at a much higher rate than girls.³ These numbers solely reflect children in preK programs in public schools. When we take into account the myriad other programs and add in the number of children who are asked to leave schools even before the age of four, the statistics are likely even more dramatic.

Politicians and experts argue about the causes of these alarming numbers. Institutions blame families, and families point the finger at institutions. While policy makers debate on how to address the issue of expulsion in the early years, teachers are left to support the diverse needs of the children in their classrooms—including those who exhibit challenging behaviors. Most agree that kicking a child out of a program does nothing to actually address the underlying issues. That course of action only serves to move a vulnerable child and family out of one institution and often into another that is equally unequipped to deal with the challenges.

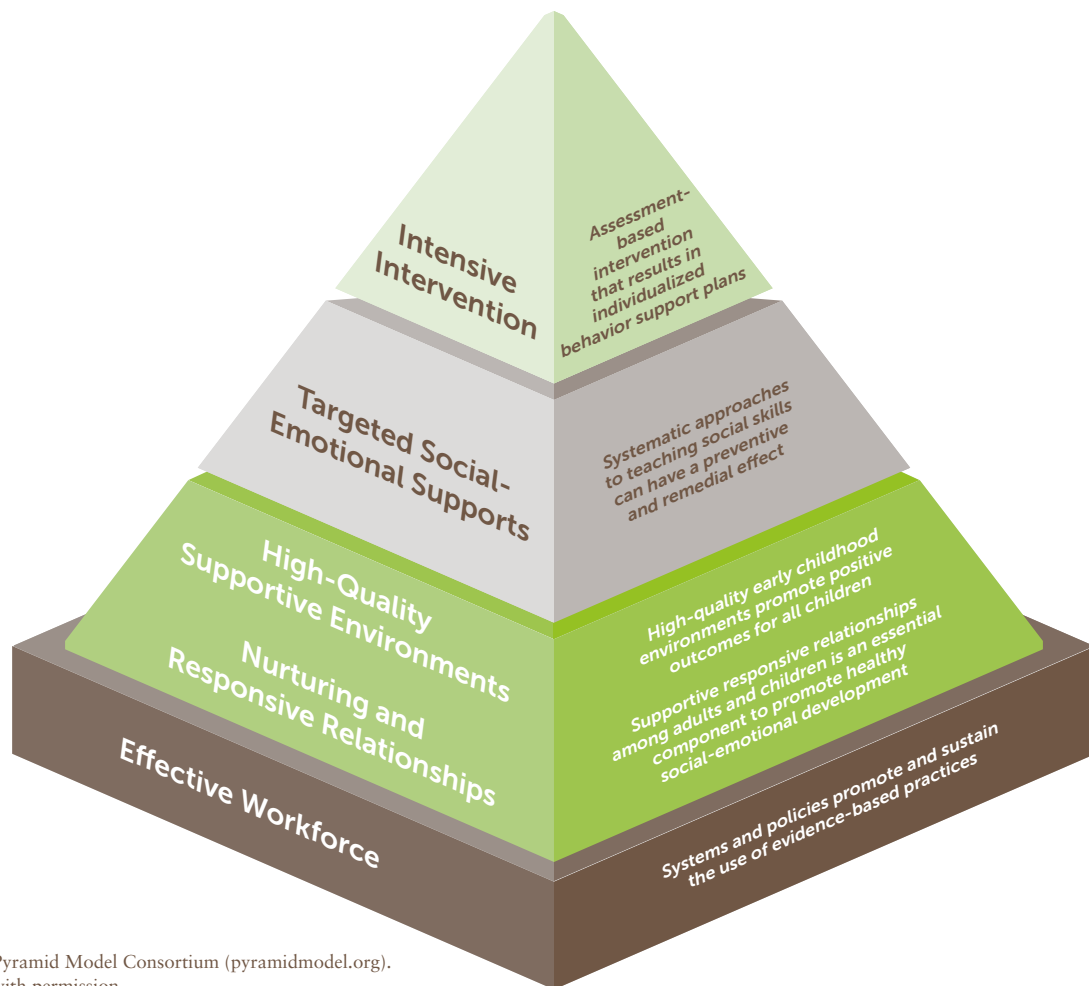
The Pyramid Model

As a teacher faced daily with addressing the many different needs of these children, I reached out for resources I could use to help them succeed. As part of my research, I spent a few days at a training institute on challenging behavior sponsored by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL). What a relief it was to know I was not the only one struggling with these issues! I found myself amidst a whole community of people dedicated to understanding and dealing with young children's challenging behaviors.

At the CSEFEL, I was introduced to the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social-Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children. It is this model that changed the way I looked at challenging behaviors and shaped the approaches you will read about in this book. The pyramid in **figure 1** shows us that children's behaviors do not happen in a vacuum. There are layers upon layers of systems and structures that, when put in place, can support children's learning and development so challenging behaviors are less likely to occur.⁴

The **dark-green section** of the pyramid tells us that many challenging behaviors can be avoided by building early childhood classrooms around the dual constructs of high-quality supportive environments and nurturing and responsive relationships between adults and children, all delivered by a highly trained, effective workforce (**dark-brown section**). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) would classify these relationships and environments as “developmentally appropriate practice,” or DAP. When we design such classrooms, we proactively address challenging behaviors by incorporating practices that help children be successful in an early childhood environment.

Figure 1 The Pyramid Model for Supporting Social-Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children*



*The Pyramid Model Consortium (pyramidmodel.org).
Used with permission.

Even in the most developmentally appropriate classroom, however, challenging behaviors *will* occur. This is because children are learning about the world. They are learning their place in that world and how to live in it with other human beings. Hence, the **light-brown section** of the pyramid shows us that by creating consistent, instructive, and appropriate responses to challenging behaviors, we can help children learn social norms and expectations and make it less likely that the challenging behaviors will recur.

When all of these foundational structures are in place—a skilled workforce, nurturing relationships, a supportive environment, and targeted social-emotional responses—challenging behaviors are less likely to occur. When they do happen, children will learn from them and go on to meet expectations the next time.

And yet children will, at times, need additional supports in response to deeper factors that may be driving their behaviors. The top **green section** of the pyramid shows that these behaviors, while rare, call for more-intensive, intentional, and directed interactions.

Other programs, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), have also advocated for a multilayered approach to addressing challenging behaviors in children. These programs rely on response-based methods in which interventions are focused on how providers respond to behaviors. Instead, the approaches in the Pyramid Model are proactive. They are designed around creating *environments* and *relationships* that support children's development so challenging behaviors are less likely to occur to begin with.

Behavior Is Communication

Children's behaviors, including those we see as challenging, are their attempts to communicate. When, as adults, we make a certain gesture to the driver who just cut us off, we are communicating our anger at our current situation. Children are just figuring out how to navigate this confusing world. They find themselves often frustrated, overwhelmed, or angry, with little ability to name—let alone express—those feelings in a constructive way. And so their behaviors speak for them.

Not only do young children lack the ability to vocalize their feelings, they are often at a loss for how to identify their needs, both emotional and physical. When teachers are dealing with challenging behaviors, it is important to first rule out physical causes for the behaviors. A child who is constantly knocking into other children, crowding others, or touching them without permission may be communicating that her vision is impaired. A visit to an eye doctor and a pair of glasses may fix the problem. A child who does not listen or speaks very loudly may be communicating that he is not hearing well. Instead of needing to learn to follow the rules, the child may need tubes in his ears or hearing aids. If a child is exhibiting challenging

Not only do young children lack the ability to vocalize their feelings, they are often at a loss for how to identify their needs.

behaviors and a physical cause is suspected, a trip to the family healthcare provider is often the first step in discovering and resolving the underlying issue.

Children's emotional needs are usually even more difficult for them to vocalize or identify. A preschooler is not going to say, "My mom is deployed, my dad is overwhelmed, and I am scared and feeling powerless and need reassurance and a sense of agency." Instead, that child may communicate this need by throwing tantrums or acting out against other children. Often challenging behaviors are simply children communicating about the classroom or the current state of their lives.

When we accept the theory that behavior is a form of communication, we must look at our role in dealing with children's behaviors differently. Traditionally, the focus has been on how a teacher *responds* to a behavior. Experts always seem to be offering new approaches to behavior modification. Time-outs, counting, positive reinforcement, behavior charts, and sending children to the office or home are all tools that teachers have used to attempt

to influence children’s behaviors—particularly those behaviors that are ongoing and especially challenging.

Generally, once a child exhibits a challenging behavior, a teacher reacts and hopes that the reaction will prevent the behavior from happening again. However, the behavior often recurs despite a teacher’s attempts to change it. This is because teachers’ reactions to behaviors do not get at the heart of the issue. In order to have a long-term impact on a behavior, an early educator must figure out what the child is communicating through that behavior. Once the teacher identifies and addresses the underlying issue, the child will no longer need to communicate it through challenging behavior. By proactively meeting the needs of children, we can reduce challenging behaviors in the early childhood classroom.

Fix the Environment, Not the Flower

My attendance at the CSEFEL and introduction to the Pyramid Model inspired me to reevaluate what it means to be an early educator. Up to that point, I had focused on “fixing” children, on finding ways to get them to conform to my expectations for their behavior in the classroom. Around the same time, I encountered the following quote from Alexander den Heijer, an inspirational speaker from the Netherlands: “When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.” This provided me a new paradigm for understanding the role of a teacher—that of a gardener.

By proactively meeting the needs of children, we can reduce challenging behaviors in the early childhood classroom.

The image of a gardener tending to a plant provides us with a different lens through which we can examine children’s challenging behaviors. I am not a gardener, but I know many people, including my own children, who are. When faced with a plant that is not thriving, the dedicated gardener will, quite literally, leave no stone unturned in the quest to discover why: Does it need more (or less) water? Is it receiving enough sun? Is the soil providing the right nutrients? Does it require stakes or supports? All these factors may be affecting the plant’s development. Rarely does a gardener throw up her hands and declare the plant unfit. Similarly, when a child exhibits challenging behaviors, what if instead of blaming the child, we first looked at the environment? What if we shifted our focus from “fixing” the child to adapting the conditions in which she spends many hours each day so that she can be successful?

About This Book

Too often when a young child is expelled from an early learning center, it is because a teacher or director decided that the child is “unfixable” and, therefore, cannot be successful in the classroom environment. Of course, educators are not all trying to be “fixers” of children. Many understand that behavior

has complex underlying causes, but they still may struggle to find an effective approach. This book will challenge you to shift your mindset from that of an educator to that of a “teacher-gardener.” When faced with challenging behaviors, the teacher-gardener accepts it as a challenge to adapt a growing child’s environment and relationships so that the child can be successful and get to the business of learning, developing, and playing.

Chapter 1: Classroom Factors. The first task of a gardener is to make sure the soil is appropriate and prepared for a plant’s success. In the same way, a teacher prepares for a child’s success by building an appropriate and responsive classroom environment. This chapter provides you with many strategies to examine your classroom environment to ensure that it is appropriate for children’s learning and development. I describe ten factors in early childhood classrooms that, depending on how they are addressed, can contribute to challenging behaviors. By addressing these factors, you can reduce the likelihood that children will act out in your classroom.

Chapter 2: Active Learning. Children are active learners. They learn best when their bodies and minds are actively engaged in the learning process. Building learning environments around the components of active learning is one of the most powerful proactive strategies you can use to reduce challenging behaviors. When you seek to teach in the ways children learn, as opposed to trying to get them to learn in the ways you want to teach, children are less likely to resort to challenging behaviors to communicate their frustration. This chapter defines what active learning looks like in practice and how you can create classroom spaces responsive to the learning needs of young children.

Chapter 3: Building Relationships with Children. Along with incorporating the tenets of active learning, the most important strategy you can use to avoid challenging behaviors is to build strong relationships with the children in your care. When you know and understand your children as individuals, you are better equipped to build a classroom that meets each child’s unique needs. When children come into your classroom knowing that they are respected and appreciated, they are less likely to act out to get the attention they need and deserve. In this chapter, we will look at ways to develop these strong relationships with children.

Chapter 4: Teaching Social Skills. During their growth, plants may falter and need special attention to keep them on a path of optimal development. These supports, such as watering, staking, and weeding, are done in response to a plant’s needs. They are not a gardener’s attempts to punish a plant, but to support the plant’s growth. In the same way, your targeted social and emotional supports in response to challenging behaviors serve to aid a child’s growth. They are designed not to punish, but to teach alternative behaviors. Chapter 4 looks at some strategies teachers may use in response to problem behaviors. Some of these strategies are ineffective—they do not serve to teach children the skills they need to be successful in the classroom. Instead, they are focused on forcing children into compliance or punishing them for their lack of understanding of the rules or their inability to follow them. After examining those strategies that are ineffective, we will look at effective strategies for helping children learn and successfully

meet classroom expectations. You can use these strategies to support children in getting along in the social environment of the early childhood classroom.

Chapter 5: The MoNSTeR Response to Challenging Behavior. Even as you shift your focus from punishment to support, you still need to respond to behaviors as they occur in the classroom. This chapter outlines a simple way for you to respond that keeps children safe, returns calm to everyone involved, and provides support and instruction for alternative behaviors.

Chapter 6: Unmet Social and Emotional Needs. At times, although well-supported, a plant may still struggle to grow. Instead of dismissing the plant as defective, the dedicated gardener strives to find ways for the plant to reach its potential. In the same way, even in the most responsive of classrooms, some children may express their need for special attention—perhaps due to circumstances at home or elsewhere in their lives—through their behaviors. In these instances, we must plan and deliver intensive interventions to help these children succeed. In chapter 6, we will look at ways you can address children’s unmet social and emotional needs through the experiences you plan, the classroom you design, and your interactions with children.

Chapter 7: Family Partnerships. Early childhood communities are stronger when teachers and families work together for the benefit of children. This partnership is especially important when a child is struggling with challenging behaviors. When their child is wrestling to meet the behavioral expectations in the classroom, family members also struggle. At times, they feel powerless in the face of their child’s perceived failure. They may feel like they are being blamed or, in turn, they may blame the teacher. When you build partnerships with families, you work together with them to better meet a child’s needs. This chapter provides strategies for building family partnerships and conducting conferences as well as a five-step conflict resolution process to use with families.

Chapter 8: A Comprehensive Approach to Challenging Behaviors. Addressing challenging behaviors in the early childhood classroom is like peeling an onion. Each step reveals another layer of information that helps you design approaches that support a child’s success. This chapter brings together all the strategies presented in the book into one comprehensive approach. You can follow a scenario step-by-step to see in action how the strategies laid out in this book are designed to prevent and address challenging behaviors.

Real-World Stories. Throughout the book, in light-brown boxes, are numerous anecdotes from early childhood classrooms I’ve worked in or observed over my career. Some of them are actual scenarios, reproduced exactly as they occurred, and some are compilations of various classroom situations. These stories illustrate the principles in the book, showing how they might play out in classrooms and helping teachers connect the theories with practice. Hopefully, these examples will help you see how you can use the ideas in this book to address real situations in your classroom.

Digital Content. Along with all the practical strategies presented in this book, you will benefit from additional digital resources designed to support your work in the classroom. These resources include customizable versions of the

behavior. But the victories were sweet and made the exhaustion worthwhile: seeing Kyra's mom in tears as her daughter graduated from preK after having been asked to leave seven other centers; overhearing Oscar proudly inform his grandmother that he had gone all day without hitting and had made a friend who wanted to play with him. Like the gardener who takes special pride in an abundant harvest, the teacher-gardener will take pride in a classroom community that benefits all children.

I'd love to hear how this book has helped you in your work with young learners. If you have stories to share or questions for me, you can reach me through my publisher at help4kids@freespirit.com or visit my website at michellesalcedo.com.

Michelle Salcedo, M.Ed.





Chapter 1

Classroom Factors: Prepare the Soil for Growth

When teachers start to view themselves as gardeners, they begin to see that their role is not to fix children who present challenges, but instead to adapt classroom environments so that more children are likely to succeed. These approaches proactively address challenging behaviors, since sometimes these behaviors are communicating that classrooms are not appropriate for how children learn and develop. When teachers create environments shaped around children's needs, they can decrease incidents of challenging behaviors and increase learning.⁵ These approaches benefit all children in the classroom and make it more likely that all children will thrive and less likely that challenging behaviors will occur.

Young children have not yet formed the ability to articulate, or even understand, the motivations behind their behaviors. When asked, "Why did you do that?" children may reply with a blank stare, an "I don't know," or a shrug of the shoulders. In most cases, these are not signs of defiance or apathy, but reflections of the truth.

A three-year-old will not walk into a classroom and say, "Listen, it was a rough night at home last night. Mom and Dad were arguing, and our family dinner turned into a shouting match. Nobody read me a story before bed, and this morning the tension was still so thick you could cut it with a knife. Mom stormed off to work without even giving me a kiss. So I'm probably going to need you to cut me some slack today." Instead, that child, when asked to stand

in line, may dissolve into a tantrum or lash out angrily at the children near her. When asked why she behaved in such a way, she will not only be unable to articulate her motivations, but will not understand them or connect them to the situation that may be bothering her.

Young children usually do not know why they behave in certain ways, but their behaviors communicate to us that something is amiss. It is up to the teacher to translate children's behaviors to understand the reasons behind them. Often behaviors are telling us something about the classroom environment. For instance, the child in the previous example may need changes to her environment to help her feel calm and supported. Once the behavior is understood, teachers can adapt the environment so the child will be more likely to thrive.

In this chapter, we will examine ten factors in early childhood classrooms that, depending on how they are addressed, can contribute to challenging behaviors. These factors include aspects of the physical classroom environment as well as the social-emotional environment created by a teacher's response to students' needs. After introducing each factor, we will look at how it can impact children's behaviors and how teachers can transform it to help children be more successful. Adapting teaching practices and classroom spaces in response to children's communications creates the highly supportive environments and nurturing and responsive relationships highlighted in CSEFEL's pyramid (see figure 1 on page 3).

Factor 1: Appropriateness of Expectations

“To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.”—Mister Rogers

Many demands are put on children every day in the classroom. Some of these expectations are developmentally appropriate, and children can meet them without incident. Some of these expectations are inappropriate, and children may respond to them with challenging behaviors. The definition of an appropriate expectation is one that children are physically, emotionally, and cognitively ready to meet. When we focus on creating environments built around appropriate expectations, we benefit all children in the classroom.

The first step in addressing this factor is to examine each expectation by asking the following questions:

1. Is the expectation appropriate for children's level of development?
2. Is the expectation appropriate for a *particular* child in the current situation?
3. Is the expectation needed for children's safety or well-being?

Examples of Inappropriate Expectations in Early Childhood Classrooms

Following are some examples of common expectations that are often developmentally inappropriate in early childhood classrooms.

Circle Time

Ms. Kaitlyn facilitates a circle time that usually lasts fifteen minutes. After leading an active song, she asks the children to sit “crisscross applesauce” while she leads them in counting to ten in Spanish. Next, she lays out some pictures of fruits and vegetables for children to sort. She ends the group experience with another song before having children say which centers they are going to play in first.

Periodically, she has to deal with children who struggle with sitting still or who meddle with the children sitting around them. But generally, children sit passively during this part of the day. However, since four-year-old Brian joined her class, her circle times have not gone so well. She spends ten minutes convincing Brian to join the group. When he is on the carpet, he will not sit still. Instead, he would rather pull hair or kick others and seems to enjoy when they react strongly. When Ms. Kaitlyn tries to control or correct Brian, he runs around the classroom yelling and sometimes throwing toys. Circle time and the other children are forgotten as Ms. Kaitlyn has to deal with Brian. If she does manage to corral him, the other children have lost interest and she must spend extra effort to get them focused back on circle time.

Ms. Kaitlyn’s focus in this situation is on “fixing” Brian so he sits during circle time and participates like the other children. She is focused on having him conform to her expectations of behavior. This is not wrong. She wants Brian to be able to function in a classroom setting, and she thinks that by placing these expectations on him she is helping him. However, what if instead of focusing on “fixing” Brian, Ms. Kaitlyn took on the role of a teacher-gardener and examined the classroom environment she has created to see how it might be contributing to his behavior? By shifting her expectations, she can create an environment in which Brian can be successful.

Let’s look at Ms. Kaitlyn’s situation through our three questions:

- 1. Is the expectation appropriate for children’s level of development?**
We can say that typically, children in a prekindergarten classroom can sit and pay attention and can participate in a large group for a short period. So for most children, the expectation that children participate in a fifteen-minute circle time seems reasonable and appropriate.
- 2. Is the expectation appropriate for a particular child in the current situation?**
In this case, it is important to differentiate between the group and the individual. While it may be reasonable for a typical four-year-old to sit and participate in circle time, Brian is showing through his behavior that the expectation may not be appropriate for him, especially given that he is new to the classroom. Ms. Kaitlyn might consider that asking Brian to sit and participate in circle time may not be appropriate for him and that this expectation is the reason for his behavior.
- 3. Is the expectation needed for children’s safety or well-being?**
Many times, teachers set expectations without really considering the reasons behind them. Why do we ask children to sit “crisscross applesauce”? Is it

unsafe for them to sit in another position? What if, instead, your rule for circle time was that children could participate however they were comfortable (in a chair, lying down, standing) as long as they didn't bother anyone else?

A bigger question may be if the expectation that children even *come* to circle time is one that is needed for their safety or well-being. While many teachers believe that children are better served if they participate in all aspects of classroom life, this expectation may not be appropriate for all children at all times.

In this instance, Brian is not benefiting from being required to participate in circle time. When Ms. Kaitlyn requires him to be there, he communicates that this expectation is not appropriate for him through his challenging behaviors. If Ms. Kaitlyn removes this expectation and lets him play in the classroom while she leads circle time, the behaviors may be avoided. Brian may follow along with circle time from another part of the room and eventually come to the gathering on his own when he is ready. Additionally, the other children would benefit from the circle time experience instead of having to wait while their teacher's attention is diverted by Brian's behavior.

When looked at through this lens, it becomes obvious that, in most cases, the expectation that all children always come to circle time and sit in a particular style does not benefit their safety or well-being. Hence, this requirement is inappropriate in the early childhood classroom. Upon this realization, some teachers express concern that if they remove this requirement, none of the children will want to participate in circle time activities. If this is the case, the bigger concern is that your circle time may not be engaging and interesting to children. We will talk more about that in chapter 2.

ASK "WHY NOT?"

On a tour of a center, I noticed a sign posted on three walls in the classroom that simply said, "Why not?" When I asked about the sign, the teacher explained her philosophy. Whenever she finds herself about to say "no" to a child or correct a behavior, she first pauses and asks herself, "Why not?" If the expectation she is about to impose on a child is not based on the child's safety or well-being, she instead engages with the child or stands back to observe the situation. She stated that since implementing this strategy, she has noticed that children are more engaged, challenging behaviors are down, and she has been surprised by what she has learned about the children.

What would change about your job if you replaced expectations for children's behavior with a "Why not?" philosophy?

Waiting

We know that children are not designed to wait. The typical child has an attention span of one to two minutes more or less than her age.⁶ So, the typically

developing three-year-old has an attention span of one to five minutes. When we put children in situations in which they must wait more than that, they may react with challenging behaviors.

Most teachers recognize that children are not designed to wait, and they create their daily routines to reduce waiting. Yet in many classrooms, waiting creeps unnoticed into the day. Some examples include:

Prepping for outside. The teacher must put sunscreen on each child before going outside. After choice time, she has children sit in a circle so she can make sure to get it on each one. By the time she has completed this task, children have been sitting and waiting for about thirty minutes.

Instead, in this situation, the teacher might put sunscreen on children during choice time. She could call children to her one by one to go through this routine. This way, all children are protected from the sun and no one has to wait. She can also take advantage of the one-on-one interaction to give individual attention to each child.

Running by the clock. Lunch is scheduled for noon. As children come in from outside at 11:30, the teacher has them wash their hands and sit at their tables so he can put out cots. Lunch is a couple of minutes late and arrives at 12:05. By the time the teacher serves the food, children have been waiting at the tables for more than twenty minutes.

A common tendency is to run the classroom by the clock instead of by what is happening in the life of the classroom that day. In this situation, children could be allowed to play until lunch is coming through the door. At this point, they could wash their hands and head to tables to eat.

Family-style meals in which children serve themselves make for even less waiting. The teacher sets the food in containers on the tables. Once children have washed their hands, they can set their places, sit down, serve themselves food, and begin to eat.

Waiting for pickup. As the end of the day nears, teachers begin to focus on making sure their rooms are ready for the following day. They may gather all children on a carpet and ask them to remain there with a book or a basket of manipulatives until they get picked up to go home. By the time the last child leaves, he has been sitting on the carpet for more than thirty minutes.

It is not an appropriate expectation that children prematurely disengage with the classroom to fit the needs of a teacher's schedule. Instead, it is a teacher's duty to interact with children as they explore the classroom until the end of the day. It is unrealistic to expect children to sit in one area with limited materials for a long time.

Waiting is one of those expectations that many teachers theoretically understand to be inappropriate for young children. Yet without realizing it, teachers often introduce waiting into the daily routine. When faced with challenging behaviors, teachers can take a step back and make sure an expectation around waiting is not the culprit.

Self-Control

Young children are learning how to make their way in the world. This includes learning how to control their bodies and impulses. At times, these impulses may contrast with the expectations teachers place on children.

Let's look at how these expectations for self-control may creep into classroom situations and impact children's behaviors.

Standing in line. Before going outside, Ms. Ramona requires her toddlers to line up quietly. Naturally, as toddlers lack the ability to control their impulses, this time of day is challenging. By the time she gets the stragglers lined up, those who were already in line have become bored and have started to play, lie down, or leave the line altogether. Ms. Ramona becomes increasingly frustrated and says things like, "We will not go outside until everyone is ready." She wastes an inordinate amount of time trying to have children meet an expectation for self-control.

Instead, Ms. Ramona could have children gather at the door. Making sure they are all with her, she could move the group outside without requiring them to stand quietly in line before going through the door. By changing the expectation from "all children must stand quietly in line" to "I will get the class outside as quickly, safely, and efficiently as possible," the challenging behaviors that resulted from children not being able to meet this expectation disappear.

Sitting quiet and still. Mr. Jacob values the importance of early literacy experiences, and he wants to make sure all children benefit from his daily storytimes. To make sure all children can see and are paying attention, the teacher has taped Xs on the carpet. He requires that all children sit on an X with their legs folded and their hands in their laps. Often, he must interrupt the story to reprimand children who are restless, wiggling around, and bothering others. These children indicate their inability to meet this expectation for self-control through their restlessness.

Child development expert Jean Piaget tells us that children are sensory-motor learners. They learn as they move and experience the world through their senses. We limit their ability to learn when we put expectations on them for bodily self-control. Expectations of self-control can be especially challenging for young boys. There is contradictory evidence on how testosterone might impact the ability of young boys to exhibit bodily control, yet surges of this hormone are thought to compel boys to action.⁷ While a teacher is saying "crisscross apple-sauce" to a wiggling child, his body may be screaming, "I have to move!" In this situation, the bodily impulses will often win out, and the resulting movement may appear as a challenging behavior to a teacher.

As discussed previously, it is not necessary for children's safety or well-being that they sit in a particular way during group experiences. Teachers eliminate many challenging behaviors when they remove this expectation for self-control. Instead of sitting quiet and still, children can be expected to choose a position

that enables them to pay attention to the teacher while not disturbing others. When children can sit comfortably, stand up, or pace, they are meeting their own developmental and learning needs. This will lead to gatherings that are much more meaningful and peaceful for everyone involved.

Teachers come into classrooms with many expectations for how children should behave. These expectations may be cultural, formed by a teacher's own experiences as a young person, and they often emerge from the best of intentions. Teachers want children to be successful in educational settings and in society. However, no matter the genesis of these expectations, they may be inappropriate for children's development. When a teacher is faced with challenging behaviors, it's essential that she examine her expectations to make sure that they are not at the root of the behaviors and, if necessary, reframe them to be more developmentally appropriate.

EACH STAGE OF CHILDHOOD IS COMPLETE IN ITSELF

At times, teachers put pressure on themselves to get children to behave in certain ways because "they are going to have to do it next year." This is the hallmark of a developmentally inappropriate expectation. We do not let teens who are too young to drive handle a car because "they are going to have to do it next year." Instead, we provide them with education and experiences so that when they are old enough to drive, they can do so successfully.

In the same way, we do not get a three-year-old ready to be four by treating her like she is already four. She will be a successful four-year-old when she is four. Now, it is her job to be three. Childhood is not a disease we need to cure as quickly as possible. Each stage of childhood should be valued and enjoyed.

The late, great Bev Bos had the following quote from J.C. Pearce hanging in her center: "Every stage of development is complete in itself. The three-year-old is not an incomplete five-year-old. The child is not an incomplete adult. Never are we simply on our way. Always we have arrived. Enjoy now."

Factor 2: Space Design

"Design is the application of intent—the opposite of happenstance, and an antidote to accident."—Robert L. Peters

The environments in which we find ourselves send messages to our brains about how we should behave. An important part of a classroom environment is how teachers use furniture and equipment to define spaces. The design of the classroom environment is so important in how it impacts children's behaviors and learning that it's referred to in Reggio Emilia as the "third teacher."⁸ As Jim Greenman so eloquently says in his book *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work*, "Space speaks to each of us. Long corridors whisper *run* to a child; picket fences invite us to trail our hands along the

slats. Physical objects have emotional messages of warmth, pleasure, solemnity, fear; action messages of *come close, touch me, stay away*; or identity messages of *I'm strong*, or *I'm fragile* . . . Spaces do more than speak—they load our bodies and minds with sensory information.”⁹

When teachers are faced with challenging behaviors, they need to look at the messages the space might be sending children, who spend forty to fifty hours a week in the classroom.

Examples of Problematic Space Design

Let's look at some common ways classroom design can contribute to challenging behaviors.

Static Classroom Arrangements

In Ms. Pam's classroom, the dramatic play area is extremely popular. Her classroom management system tells children that only three kids can be in the center at a time, but this always seems to cause problems. Sometimes children push others in their rush to be the first ones in their favorite center. Tantrums and arguments ensue when it is already full and children can't get in. At times children try to sneak in, only to be greeted by a chorus of “no” and “I'm telling” from those already in the center. Ms. Pam, frustrated by the behaviors she sees in this popular center, often ends up closing it in an attempt to teach children that their behavior is not appropriate.

After reading an article about the impact of classroom arrangement on children's behaviors, Ms. Pam decides to step back and observe how children are using the space. She also invites a coworker to observe and give her some ideas. After discussing their observations, the teachers notice that many of the challenging behaviors are due to the current popularity of the dramatic play area. After school, Ms. Pam and her director rearrange the space to make her dramatic play center bigger so it can accommodate more children. She then evaluates other centers to make sure that all of them have interesting materials for children to explore. She also incorporates more pretend play opportunities in the other centers so children find their interests reflected throughout the classroom. For example, she adds paper dolls and small furniture to the block center. She adds dishes and pretend food to the sensory table. She also makes sure that there are opportunities for pretend play when children are outside.

When the children return to the classroom the following day, they are excited to find their new space. They spread out around the room to investigate the new additions to the learning centers. Those still drawn to the dramatic play area find more space to move around, and more children can join in the play. By shifting her focus from punishing children for their behaviors to looking at what may be causing them, Ms. Pam discovers ways to set children up for success.

In the face of challenging behaviors, teachers need to take a step back and see how children are using centers and how the spaces might be contributing to these behaviors. In some instances, slight shifts in setup might extinguish problems by making the spaces more conducive to how children currently use them.

Cramped Learning Centers

Just like Ms. Pam, Ms. Kanessa struggles with challenging behaviors in one of her centers: the block center. Even when only two children are in the center, fights seem to break out in this area. Because of the narrow layout of the center, children often bump into each other's structures. They become frustrated and often lash out angrily when a structure comes toppling down. When children fight, Ms. Kanessa sends them into other centers or even closes the block center, but nothing she does seems to make a difference in children's behavior.

Once again, this center is not set up for children's success based on how they are using it. Young kids often struggle with impulse control. When someone bumps them or the structure they have so carefully constructed, they will often strike out in frustration. Because the block center is so narrow, those collisions are bound to happen. Ms. Kanessa can look at her classroom as a whole and find a way to restructure it so the block center allows more space for building.

Spaces That Encourage Running

"Walking feet" is rule number two on a posted list of rules in Ms. Gloria's preschool room. Despite this and constant reminders to use "walking feet," children run laps around tables that are lined up on one side of the classroom. Large undefined spaces scream "Run!" to a child who would like nothing more than an excuse to run, run, run through life. Running is not a challenging behavior in itself, but it can be dangerous in the classroom. In Ms. Gloria's classroom, accidents are common as children often bump into each other or collide with furniture as they run around.

If running often occurs in a classroom, the teacher's first step is to rearrange furniture and equipment so it cuts off the running paths. There are two classroom arrangements that can lead to running. The first is a large open area set aside for circle and group times. The other is an arrangement in which tables are lined up cafeteria-style on one side of the classroom. Both setups provide running tracks for children and can lead to overcrowding in other centers as they are squeezed into the remaining space.

Open Learning Centers

Learning centers with open boundaries often create pathways that cause children to disrupt each other's play, which may lead to confusion and fighting. Here's an example:

Four children are working hard in the dramatic play center to set up a picnic for themselves and their babies. Because the center is in front of the bathrooms and sinks, other children cross over the picnic blanket, scattering the dishes and interrupting the picnic play. Cries of frustration turn into cries of pain as one of the picnickers pushes another child into a shelf because he kicked over her baby on his way back from the bathroom.

With this classroom design, conflicts should be expected. Some centers, such as the block and pretend play centers, are more conducive to social and constructive play that, unfortunately, can easily be interrupted. Challenging behaviors will decrease when classrooms are arranged so that centers are large enough for this type of play and situated where other children do not have to pass through them to get to other parts of the classroom.

Furniture Placement

Ms. Keisha is frustrated because her toddlers seem to be more interested in dumping all the toys from the shelves instead of playing with them. She spends her time scooping manipulatives back into baskets instead of interacting with children. By the end of free choice time, the classroom is in chaos. All the toys are on the floor, and children are throwing them or running around uninterested in the materials in the classroom.

In her classroom, Ms. Keisha has arranged the furniture so that all the shelves are on the carpet, facing each other in a large square and two tables are placed on the tiled section of the room. Upon closer examination, it is easy to see how this arrangement contributes to how children are using the materials. The shelves form a rectangular play space on the carpet. As children remove the toys, they are crowded together and have no guidance as to how they are expected to use the materials. In the absence of these physical clues, children either quickly drop their selected toy to find something else or play with the toy in an inappropriate manner. And as children are limited to the small space on the carpet, they often bump into each other and interfere with each other's play. With some simple furniture rearrangement, Ms. Keisha can define learning centers for children, spread them throughout the classroom to lessen physical confrontations, and help children understand the expectations for using the materials.

Teachers can use their furniture arrangements to help children understand how to use learning centers. It is tempting to place tables close together on tiled areas so that it's easier to supervise and assist children as well as clean up after them. But when tables are arranged in this way, children are less likely to

use them during play since they are not placed next to a shelf with accessible materials. Likewise, when shelves are all grouped together, often on the carpet, children may not understand how various toys can be used differently—for example, some used on the floor, some used on tables, and some used while standing. Also, shelves placed close together in one section of the room force children to play in close proximity to one another. With this arrangement, children watch how others are using the materials and may copy behaviors that look like more fun, such as throwing or dumping toys.

Instead of automatically thinking “tile beneath tables for eating” and “carpet beneath shelves in centers,” teachers can look at their classroom as a blank canvas. Tables and shelves can be placed where they make sense, not how the flooring suggests. An arrangement in which tables and shelves are paired with purpose throughout the classroom can help children understand how to use materials.

For example, a manipulatives shelf placed next to a table sends the message that children can use the materials from the shelf on the table, instead of throwing them in the air or dumping them on the ground. Likewise, a block shelf placed on carpet and facing a wall indicates to children that they can build with the blocks on the floor. Also, spreading out the shelves and facing them in different directions helps children understand that different play happens in the separate areas created by the furniture arrangement. Additionally, this disperses children across the classroom so they are not playing so close together.

In Ms. Keisha’s classroom, rearranging the furniture to create clear shelf-and-table centers reduces the challenging behaviors that leave her frustrated. For example, she moves one of the shelves next to a table on the tiles. On this shelf, she places art materials that she wants children to use on the table. Next, she moves one of the tables next to a shelf on the carpet and places puzzles and other manipulatives on this shelf so children use them on the table instead of the floor. She turns the other shelves so they are facing in opposite directions and defines a block center and a pretend play center. By spreading out and defining the centers, Ms. Keisha helps her children understand how to use the materials, thus eliminating the challenging behaviors that resulted from this factor.

In all the examples in this section, the challenging behaviors could have been avoided through intentional and appropriate classroom arrangement. Teachers can use furniture, floor coverings, and learning center arrangements to communicate behavioral expectations and help children meet these expectations in the classroom.