

# 31 Ways to Avoid Challenging Behavior!





Dear Reader –

Challenging behavior is probably the topic early childhood professionals most want to learn more about. It certainly was the most popular workshop I've ever conducted in decades of presenting at the National Association for the Education of Young Children conferences!

What those attendees discovered – and what you'll discover here – is that I have a different approach to "behavior management."

First, my intention is to help you *prevent* challenging behavior before it begins. Second, my approach is born from an empathy for the reasons *why* children act out. I tend to agree with Alfie Kohn's statement that "When kids don't do what we've asked, the problem may not be with the kids but with what we've asked."

I've been in the early childhood field for over four decades now, and in that time I've made my share of mistakes! But I've learned from many (most?) of them, and the content I offer here is the result of what I've learned.

The recommendations that follow are in no particular order. I hope they can spare you and the children the frustration I experienced!

Playfully yours –

rae

**Rae's mission:**  
  
**To ensure that children have the chance to be children ... and that child development guides all our practices with them.**

# I. Don't forget they're children!

This may seem to be fairly obvious. But I think we sometimes forget that we're not dealing with little adults!

For example, have you ever handed out a prop and expected the children to stand still with it, patiently awaiting further instructions? I have!



And guess what. It wasn't successful. Because children are inquisitive, joyful creatures! If we can keep that in mind, we'll know that they need a minute or two to experiment with the prop. To explore its possibilities.

Once they've done that, they're ready to listen to what you have in mind!

## 2. Match your expectations to their developmental stage & abilities!

So much of the reason children are acting out these days is because they're frustrated by the expectations of them!

When a 3- or 4-year-old child can't properly grasp a pencil, let alone write a paragraph (both stories I've been told), they become anxious and discouraged. They *want* to please the important adults in their lives! But if they're not yet developmentally equipped to do so, the only way they know to express their frustration is by acting out.



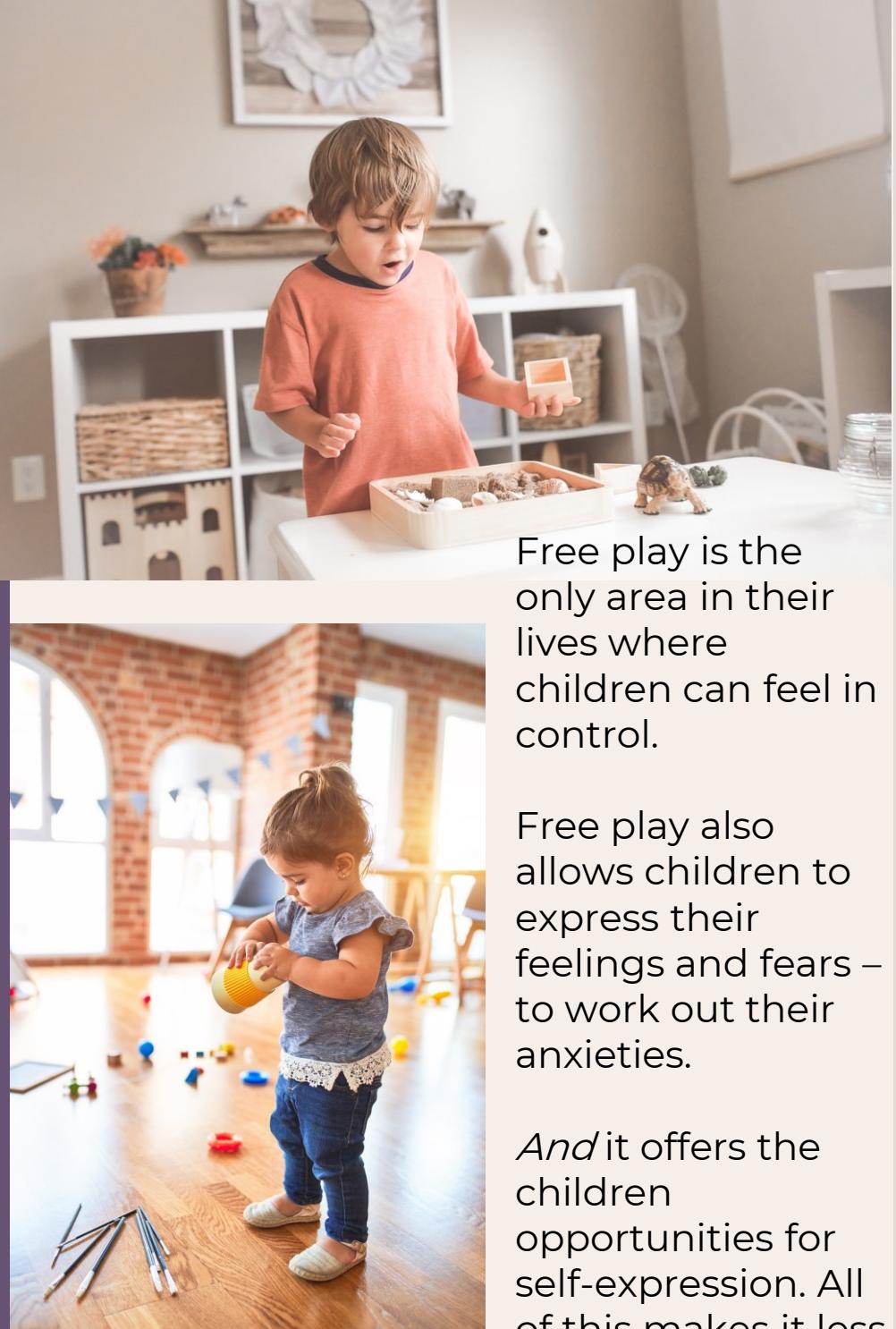
## 3. Remember not to take it personally.

This is easier said than done!

But challenging behavior is far more likely to be a call for attention than it is a personal vendetta.

Child psychotherapist Katie Hurley says that when children lose control, what they're really saying is "I need you – I don't know how to do this." That's when we need to "meet their storm with our calm."

## 4. Make time for free play!



Free play is the only area in their lives where children can feel in control.

Free play also allows children to express their feelings and fears – to work out their anxieties.

*And it offers the children opportunities for self-expression. All of this makes it less likely that they will want to act out!*

## 5. Never withhold recess!



Recess is one of the last bastions of free play, which we've already determined children need.

They also need physical activity and time outdoors (more on these later)! And you know what? Not only is withholding recess almost never a logical consequence for any “infraction;” also, it doesn’t work to deter behavior challenges and could have the opposite effect!

## 6. Help them understand personal space!



Some children like to “crash and go-bang!” Naturally, that can cause problems. That’s why it’s important to help them understand and respect personal space – their own and others’.

A plastic hoop is a great representation of a child’s personal space. Invite them to place the hoop on the floor and stand inside it. How high can they reach? How low? How wide? This is the space that belongs to them!

Alternatively, you can invite them to imagine they’re each inside their own bubble. Asking them to pretend to paint the inside of that bubble helps them take ownership of it. So, when you ask them to move throughout an area without bursting their own or anyone else’s, they’ll be more willing to oblige!

## 7. Offer them choices.

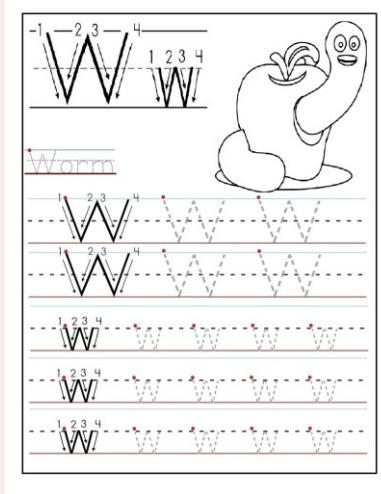
When children are trusted with choices, they feel more in control and are less likely to act out. Whenever possible, allow them to choose what they want to work on, read, play with, or participate in.



## 8. Offer a variety of seating options.

This goes hand in hand with the last recommendation. When children are allowed to sit, lie, or stand as needed, they'll be more comfortable. When they're comfortable, it's easier for them to be engaged. And when they're engaged, they're less likely to need to act out.

## 9. Avoid work-sheets!



These do not engage the mind...and when the mind is disengaged (i.e., children are bored), they just might show you!



Children are experiential learners who acquire and retain information using all their senses! Screens – and worksheets – do not offer the 3-dimensional experiences they need!

Additionally, screen time has been shown to increase aggression and anxiety in children.

Research has shown that cooperation:

- leads to friendlier feelings among participants;
- promotes a feeling of being in control of one's life;
- results in greater sensitivity and trust toward others.



Competition, on the other hand, significantly increases aggression and invites the use of cheating and other antisocial behaviors in order to win. Choosing Cooperative Musical Chairs – where everyone has to share the remaining chairs – is far more likely to lead to a pleasant environment!

## II. Choose cooperation over competition!

## 12. Establish only the most important rules.



Too many rules can overwhelm young children. That's why you should focus on two or three overriding protocols.

You might even choose to have just one: we will respect one another. And, of course, you'll want to have a conversation about what that means!

## 13. Involve the children in rule making.

Involving the children will make them feel respected and important.

They'll also feel ownership of any rules they've helped create and so are more likely to abide by them!



## 14. Let children fidget.

Yes, this seems counterintuitive. But research now shows that children fidget in order to wake up their brains. Many need to move in order to concentrate.



When we tell them to be still, they use all their energy to focus on being still, which renders them unable to focus on the task at hand.

## 15. Let children stand as needed.



The human body wasn't meant to sit. In fact, sitting increases fatigue and reduces concentration, which can lead to disruptive behavior. Standing, on the other hand, has been shown to improve alertness and on-task behavior!

## 16. Get them moving!

The human body was meant to move! Physical activity has more to offer the children than I can cover here. But in terms of avoiding challenging behavior, I want to repeat that sitting increases fatigue and reduces concentration. Both of those conditions lead to disruptive behavior.

When the children experience moderate- to vigorous-intensity movement, their brains receive the nutrients – water, oxygen, and glucose – they need to function optimally! Also, physical activity bumps up production of endorphins, the brain's feel-good neurotransmitters, and provides stress relief!



## 17. Think outside the bubble for transitions!



Asking children to be still, be quiet, and stay in a straight line is asking for trouble. After all, these are three things they're not yet developmentally equipped to do! And asking them to walk with hands behind their backs and "bubbles" in their mouths doesn't respect who they are.

Why not involve their minds and imaginations? If we invite them to move like "whispers," or as though they're walking on eggs they don't want to break, they'll be too engaged to want to act out! Or, you could play "choo-choo" or Follow the Leader! (They love this stuff!)



## 18. Use games to promote self-regulation!

Often, there's confusion about what self-regulation is and how it should be fostered. Self-regulation specifically refers to the ability to regulate *oneself* without intervention from an outside source, such as another person. In the case of young children, it means adults don't always have to tell them how to behave; they've learned to control their emotions and resist impulsive behavior *on their own*.



How do we inspire children to *want* to wait, be quiet, or be still? We make it fun! Playing games like Statues or Simon Says (without the elimination process!) does just that!

## 19. Foster intrinsic motivation.



As exemplified in the last suggestion, when children *want* to do something, they do it! And what makes young children want to do something? It has to feel good. It has to be fun! That's where their intrinsic motivation – their inner desire to do something – comes from.

This isn't something to be squashed out of them; it's something to love and admire about them.

Praise and rewards teach children to do something because there's a prize at the end. *Wanting* to do something – intrinsic motivation – is the real prize in life!

## 20. Use praise wisely.



The “self-esteem” movement and its practices – e.g., saying “Good job!” for everything a child does – has been linked to a need for instant gratification and a lack of frustration tolerance in children. As psychiatrist Marilyn Benoit notes, this has resulted in “entitled, demanding, impatient” preschoolers.

Instead of making a value judgment, we should instead describe what the child is doing (e.g., “I see you’ve used a lot of purple in your drawing!”), providing them with helpful information.

We want to avoid false praise at all costs. Not only do kids know it when they hear it; also, they know they’re going to receive it regardless of what they do.

## 21. Make time for down-time.



*Everyone* requires downtime. Without it we become overwhelmed. And overwhelmed children just may show you with their behavior how that makes them feel!

You may no longer be allowed to include naptime as part of the day, but it's important to ensure children get *some* time to rest!

## 22. Help children learn to relax.



Relaxation is a *learned* skill, and early childhood is the time to begin developing it. When you facilitate relaxation exercises, the children learn they can be in control of their mind and body. This allows for self-regulation!

## 23. Don't aim for silence!

Young children are lively, enthusiastic creatures! It should be one of the things we most love about them.

If we do love and respect that, we can't possibly expect silence in an early childhood setting. If we do, we're going to be disappointed and frustrated. (To me, a silent setting means something's very wrong!)

We *can* ask that there be little *noise* -- which is different from sound. But the best chance of achieving that is to discuss it with the children, letting them tell you why it's important not to have a lot of noise.

You should also establish a signal (two hand claps, for example) that means it's time for them to "stop, look, and listen." Make it their "secret code," and they'll be glad to comply!



## 24. Foster a feeling of belonging.



Circles bring about a sense of community. And when everyone in a circle moves or sings in synchronization, that enhances the feeling of belonging. When children feel a part of a community, they're more secure and therefore less likely to act out.

For these reasons, you should make circle games and activities a large part of your program!

## 25. Encourage divergent problem solving.

When children are experiencing success – and able to express themselves – they’re much more likely to be engaged. And engaged children are less likely to want to call negative attention to themselves!

You can ensure more success – while fostering the ability to *think* – by employing divergent problem solving whenever possible.

With divergent problem solving, there are multiple solutions to a single challenge. This allows children to respond in their own ways, at their own levels.

For example, an invitation to demonstrate crooked shapes with the body could result in as many different crooked shapes as there are children in the room. A challenge to balance on two body parts might lead to children with lesser experience standing on their feet, those with more confidence in their stability balancing on an elbow and a knee, and those with even more confidence balancing on their knees alone.

Here’s an example from math: challenge the children to use manipulatives to find two different ways to create the concept of nine (e.g., one and eight, four and five, six and three, or three sets of three).

Validate the variety of responses you receive so the children realize there are many possibilities to get it “right!”

## 26. Assume they can meet your challenges.

If you assume the children are capable of handling your challenges, they're more likely to *be* capable. They will rise to your expectations. For example, a challenge that begins with "Find three ways to..." assumes that the children can find at least three ways to respond. Similarly, a challenge that begins with "Show me you can..." implies that you know the children can do what you ask.

Conversely, if you present challenges by asking, "Can you...," you're implying a choice. Many young children will be happy to say no!

You have in your favor the fact that children love to display their abilities to you. So if you introduce invitations with phrases like "Let me see you..." or "Show me you can...," children will want to show you they can! It's a simple technique but amazingly effective.



## 27. Use your voice as a tool.

This is a straight-forward and simple suggestion. If you want the children to move slowly, speak slowly. If you want them to move quietly, speak quietly. Also, just as you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, you can attract more attention with a lower volume than a higher one. Children are far more likely to react to a whisper than to a yell.



## 28. Use their names.

Another way you can use your voice as a tool is to say (or sing) the children's names often. A child's name is special. Children love the sound of their names. When an adult uses a child's name in a positive way, the child receives recognition and reassurance.

## 29. Monitor energy levels.



Too much energy can result in frustrating, unproductive, unmanageable experiences. Too little energy, however, can have comparable results. Tired children tend to display irritability and off-task behavior.

Two guidelines offered by the late Clare Cherry are planning livelier activities when the children are well rested and not overstimulated from another activity, and discontinuing lively activities before the children become tired.

Usually, alternating livelier and quieter activities is enough to prevent frenzy and fatigue.

## 30. Be flexible!

You need a flexibility of mind and spirit to accept that your ideas will not always go exactly as you've imagined or as you've outlined them on paper (as I foolishly expected when I first began teaching young children)! In monitoring children's energy levels, for instance, you may suddenly find it necessary to veer from your original course to either excite or calm the class. Perhaps nothing you planned is interesting to the children on a particular day, forcing you to improvise or go to another activity entirely. Also, young children have wonderful ideas of their own – ideas that would never occur to you. Feel free to go with them!



## 31. Go outside!



When you think about avoiding behavior challenges, you may not immediately think that allowing children time outdoors can have a significant impact. But it can, and there are many reasons why.

Outdoors, children can engage in large, loud, and boisterous behaviors that allow them to burn off excess energy. Also, nature experiences have been shown to create a sense of peace in children. It has even been shown to reduce or eliminate bullying. A 2018 study demonstrated that time spent in nature correlates with less hyperactivity and fewer behavioral issues.



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