

An Ounce of Prevention

Simple strategies that stop big problems before they start.



1. Stay Regulated Yourself

You set the emotional tone. If you're calm and regulated, kids are more likely to follow suit.

- Example: Take slow breaths before responding to difficult behavior. Narrate your calm: "I'm taking a breath so I can stay focused."

2. Clear Rules with Visuals

Young children need rules that are simple, positively worded, and easy to understand at a glance.

- Example: "Use kind hands," "Walking feet," and "Indoor voices" with hand-drawn or printed icons posted at the children's eye level.

3. Avoid Vague Language

Unclear directions lead to confusion and resistance. Be specific and concrete.

- Example: Instead of saying "Clean up," say, "Put the markers in the blue basket and put your trash in the trash can."

4. Know Their Developmental Window

Plan with realistic expectations. Attention spans are short—about 1-2 minutes per year of age.

- Example: Keep activities snappy, interactive, and movement-rich. Break things into small chunks and re-engage often.

5. Teach Problem-Solving

Help kids identify problems and walk through solutions. It builds confidence and reduces frustration-fueled behavior.

- Example: Use puppets to role-play conflict resolution: "What could we do instead of grabbing?"

6. Practice Calm-Down Techniques When Calm

Children won't learn to calm down when they're mid-meltdown. Teach the tools *before* they need them.

- Example: Do breathing exercises or yoga poses as a group during circle time. Go over specific challenging scenarios you've seen and a calm-down technique that may help.

7. Visuals for Everything

From routines and behavior expectations to keeping your room organized, visuals are your best friend—especially for non-verbal or neurodiverse learners.

- Example: Have a hard time lining up to go inside after outside time? Take a picture of the children lined up and show them the visual when outside time is over and the class needs to line up.
- Pro tip: label all of your toys and materials in the classroom so children know where to put them away at clean up time.

8. Music Cues

Auditory signals prompt smoother transitions. Children learn to associate specific sounds with actions.

- Example: Play the same cleanup song every day, or a soft chime when it's time to transition to rest.



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9. Individualized Greetings

Warm hellos matter. Kids feel seen, valued, and ready to engage when welcomed intentionally.

- Example: Greet every child by name at the door, offer a handshake, fist bump, or hug (their choice), and make eye contact.

10. Line-Up Spots

Spots on the floor give children structure and remove the ambiguity—and drama—of lining up.

- Example: Use colored dots or animal prints. “Find your frog” turns lining up into a fun game.

11. Transition Activities

Downtime during transitions is often when chaos strikes. Keep their bodies and brains busy.

- Example: Use cleanup songs, or group reading on the rug while children wait to wash hands for snack, as they wash hands they sit down for snack.

12. Predictable Routines

Keeping things consistent builds trust and helps children settle in. Routine reduces uncertainty, which is often the root of behavior flare-ups.

- Example: Always follow the same steps during diapering or lunch. Narrate what’s next so kids begin to internalize the rhythm.

13. Visual Timers

Time is abstract for young children. A visual countdown makes it tangible and helps with transitions.

- Example: Use sand timers, digital countdown apps, or a dry erase countdown clock to signal how long an activity will last.

14. Visual Schedule

Children feel safer when they know what comes next. A consistent, picture-based schedule reduces anxiety and minimizes pushback.

- Example: Post images for each daily activity—arrival, circle time, snack, outside. Refer to it anytime a child asks “What now?” or seems unsure.

15. Partner with Families

Teamwork between educators and families creates consistency and supports behavior across environments.

- Example: Ask parents how they comfort at home. Use shared language like “snuggle bear time” for calming routines.

16. Positive Behavior Acknowledgement

Catch them being good—specifically and often. Praise what you want to see repeated.

- Example: “I love how you used walking feet!” or “Thank you for waiting your turn. That was kind.”