

REDIRECTING BEHAVIORS

If you facilitate a group for kids or teens, you've likely encountered behaviors that create challenges for you or the other participants. While we want kids and teens to freely express themselves and their grief at Dougy Center, there are times when it's necessary to redirect certain behaviors.

We believe that grief is often communicated through behavior and that some, if not all, of the behaviors that create a challenge can be connected to processing loss. So, if the goal in our peer support groups is to create a safe space for kids and teens to express and process their grief, what should we do when some forms of expression are challenging and/or in direct conflict with our safety guidelines? In these instances, the key is to address these behaviors in supportive ways that don't close the door on kids and teens being able to express their grief.

Reflecting on your time as a volunteer, which behaviors have you found most challenging to navigate? Using the skill of self-awareness, take a moment to explore these questions:

- ➔ **Why does this behavior feel so challenging?**
- ➔ **What narratives do I hold about the motivation for this behavior and how it impacts me and others?**
- ➔ **Is there a particular behavior that feels harder to redirect than others?**
- ➔ **When this behavior happens, how do I instinctually want to respond?**

There are no right answers, just information to better understand your reactions and how you tend to want to respond. The next step is to assess if a particular behavior is one that needs to be redirected. Use these questions to help you decide.

1. Is this behavior physically or emotionally unsafe?

If yes, it's one that should be redirected. Of course, the perception of safety can be subjective. Let's take the Volcano room for example. One volunteer might feel safe with children piling up stuffies to jump into while another might not. In this case, it's always okay to say, "that doesn't feel safe to me, can we find another way to play in here." Regardless of a facilitator's comfort level, there are some behaviors that, across the board, are considered unsafe at Dougy Center. These include hitting or kicking someone, using derogatory language towards someone in the group, destroying property, or threatening others.



2. Is this behavior negatively impacting the group process?

Behaviors in this category can, but don't always, include: refusing to let other kids play in a space, talking over someone else, telling kids to say, "I pass," giving unsolicited advice, or telling someone to change how they think or feel about something related to their grief.

3. Who is being impacted by the behavior?

If the behavior is negatively affecting other participants (see examples above), it should be redirected. If it is only negatively affecting a staff member or volunteer, the answer to "should it be redirected" is often "it depends." This is when it's good to come back to the skill of self-awareness and the questions we explored earlier. Here's an example: a participant in a teen group says, "I was really pissed off at my dad and when he was trying to make up with



Facilitator Tips:

me, I told him to kiss my a**. He can't just get on my good side after lying to me about my mom being sick." As a volunteer, you might have a strong reaction to the language and sentiment but notice that none of the other teens do. In this situation, the behavior isn't unsafe and it's not negatively affecting the other participants, so it likely doesn't need to be redirected. Now, that doesn't mean your reaction is wrong, but rather than redirecting the teen, you can wait and process it in post-meeting with your co-facilitators and Staff Coordinator.

4. Can this behavior continue in a different space?

This is where redirection is key. If kids or teens are engaging in behaviors that are a mismatch with what's happening in group, it is helpful to offer other places or ways that expression can happen. Here are four examples:

- **A child making paper airplanes and flying them in the opening circle.** "You can always draw during this time, but let's wait to make airplanes until after opening circle. Maybe we can play in the art room?"
- **Two kids throwing stuffies at each other in the talking room.** "Remember, there's no throwing in this room, but when we head to play, you can throw in the big energy spaces like outside, Volcano Room, or Sports Room. Please hold on to your stuffies!"
- **A child saying they are mad at another participant.** "I hear you're angry, but we can't hit ourselves or others. Would you like to go outside/throw the bean bags/punch the punching bag/etc. during free time?"
- **Teens having a side conversation during opening circle or candle lighting.** "Hey, it's hard to hear when you're talking. Can you save that conversation for open time/when group is over?"

Even though we want to avoid labeling behaviors as wrong or bad, if based on the above questions, a behavior warrants redirection, here are five additional strategies to try:

1. In opening and closing circles, you can provide and encourage stuffies, fidgets, and lapboards/paper/markers for drawing. These are great options for kids and teens who need something to do with their hands/bodies during the parts of group that are less physically active.
2. Invite the child or teen to be a helper by asking them to do things like turn down the lights, hand out lapboards, count how many people are present, assist with snack time, and turn off candles at the end of group.
3. Focus on the 1:5 ratio. Offer 5 supportive comments for each redirection. "Thank you for helping hand out paper and waiting until it was your turn to share. During play time I saw you help Devonte with finding art supplies. I know you really wanted to keep working on your collage when I said it was clean up time. Next time, I'd love for you to jump in on cleaning up right when I ask so we can all finish together. At the end of group, you helped so much with arranging the stuffies, thank you for doing that!"
4. Be intentional with your location in the room. This might mean sitting between kids during opening and closing circles, standing where you can see all the kids in a play space, or keeping track of where your co-facilitators are so you can position yourself in a spot that's most supportive for the group.
5. Identify one or two go-to phrases you're comfortable using to redirect behaviors. Suggestions include, "I'm not comfortable with that, I'm sorry to interrupt, but remember our ____ guideline, I can't hear what others are saying." Of course, if more gentle redirections don't make a difference, you can always use the Stop and I Mean It guideline.



Facilitator Tips:

Like so much of our work at Dougy Center, the narratives we create around behavior are deeply personal. The way we react is often rooted in our own histories and unique identity constellations. Because we've been conditioned to see certain actions as "good" or "bad," the skill of self-awareness becomes our most valuable tool. It allows us to pause, moving away from automatic reactions and leaning towards more intentional responses.

As always, you don't have to do this work alone. Please continue to bring up questions and concerns around behaviors that challenge you in your pre- and post-meetings.



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for Children & Families

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About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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