Challenging behaviors
(or problem behaviors)

"result in self-injury, injury to others, cause damage to the physical environment and/or interfere with the acquisition of new skills, and/or socially isolate the child"

(Doss & Reschke, 1991)

Teachers don’t know what to do.

Either their training did not prepare them for what they are experiencing—or the strategies they learned are not effective.

Our search for a better understanding of the needs of children who engage in challenging behavior:

multiple and multidirectional layers of influence on child’s behavior
Social-Emotional Development
The developmentally and culturally appropriate ability to:
• Manage emotions
• Relate to adults
• Relate to peers
• Feel good about oneself
Connors-Tadros & Yates, 2004

Head & Heart
• Viewing children & ourselves holistically
• Our thoughts and emotions are intertwined
• How can we work together to support children’s mental health?
• What do children need? What do staff need?

Bridging Two Perspectives
Education
• Positive Behavior Support
• Origin: assisting children with disabilities
• Question: What is the motivation of the behavior?
FUNCTION

Mental Health
• Psychodynamic Therapeutic Support
• Origin: assisting children who have experienced difficult emotional environments
• Question: Why does the child behave in this way?
EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Bridging
Education
• Theoretical Orientation:
  Behavior problems are not abnormalities, but reasonable adaptations necessitated by the abilities of our children and the limitations of their environments

Mental Health
• Theoretical Orientation:
  Children are biologically set up to establish relationships with adult caregivers. As a result of early relationships, children develop a “mental model” of what they can expect from the world.

Mental Health
• Mental health is a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity. Mental health is indispensable to personal well-being, family and interpersonal relationships, and contribution to community or society.
• Mental health is the springboard of thinking and communication skills, learning, emotional growth, resilience and self-esteem.
An estimated 80,000 Minnesota children have severe emotional problems.

Only 1 in 5 receive treatment for those problems.

73% of children with behavior disorders who drop out of school are arrested within 5 years.

Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for 15-34 year olds in Minnesota.

Mental health disorders are the leading cause of disability in North America and Europe.

- 30% of Minnesotans (of us here tonight) will seek help from a psychiatrist sometime during their lives.
  
  MPR feature “A Bad State of Mind”

- Minnesota has one of the lowest ratios of psychiatrists in the nation—33% lower than the national average.
  
  Minnesota Psychiatric Society Report

Reframing problematic emotional responses and challenging behavior…
An example of reframing

Anger is the flip side of fear.

Julie Nelson, Families Together, St Paul

Natalie

- Robert: “She had empty eyes.”
- She was unpredictable.
- Are there patterns to her behavior?

Staff Feelings

- “We didn’t know what to do.”
- Teachers have feelings about children’s behavior and need time to reflect on these feelings as well as on the behavior of the children.

Natalie

- She was “aching to reach out” but when we did she couldn’t accept it.
- Limited language development
  - Couldn’t express herself
  - Couldn’t maintain relationships
- Overly possessive with things

We learn more about Natalie

- When enrolled, “she had a lot of problems.”
- “She could not speak well. She could not express herself.”
- “She didn’t understand much.”
- “…if her mother had helped her…Her mother is ill.”

Why don’t we go straight to strategies?

- a “bag of tricks” is not what we bring to the situation
- we need to decide what the child needs (the meaning of the behavior) before we can decide what to do

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CEED - U of M
From a mental health perspective, we recognize that we experience the present in part through the past.

Relationships
- Child & other children
  - friendships, conflicts
- Child & family (parents/caregivers, extended family)
  - attachment, guidance & discipline, abuse, neglect
- Child & caregiver/teacher
  - attachment, guidance & discipline

Children’s Critical Questions
- Am I worth of attention?
- Are you trustworthy?
- Am I safe enough here to play and learn?
- Will anybody take care of me?
- Do I have any power here?

Problem-Solving:
6 Important Questions
- Describe the problem interaction in detail.
- How did it make you feel?
- What did you do in response to the child’s behavior?
- What was the child’s response to what you did?
- What is your guess about the child’s mistaken goal?
- What are some alternative suggestions you could try the next time the problem occurs?

Positive Discipline by Jane Nelsen, Ed.D.

Ross Greene’s 3 steps:
- Show empathy - put the child’s concern on the table.
- Define the problem - put the adult’s concern on the table. Now there are two concerns that have to be reconciled.
- Extend an invitation to a problem-solving party.

We need to do WITH children not To children
Ross Greene talks about three choices:
- We can impose our will.
- We can collaborate on problem-solving.
- We can “let it go” – eliminate the demand.
We live in a win/lose society.

We can do a better job of teaching how to get to a win/win result.

The Teacher
Challenges
Affirms
Listens…and Hears

Dr. Roberta Nelson

“To Listen” =

• Ear
• You
• Eye
• Undivided attention
• Heart

The Teacher is the Curriculum

Not the
– Goals
– Rules
– Activities
– Materials
– Facilities

Reward and punishment systems…

• are not a good match.
• We need to teach them how to THINK—show them how to problem-solve by being flexible, not so rigid, and by organizing their thoughts and controlling impulses.
Supports or Barriers?

- Teacher expectations
- Teacher control of the classroom
- Interactions between teacher and children
- Physical environment of the setting
- Abilities of individual children
- Other child needs that impact behavior

Points we should ponder:

- Setting events
- Life circumstances/events
- Function and communication
- Relationships

Life circumstances/events

- Effect of physical and developmental disabilities
- Family’s access to resources
- Family/cultural expectations
- Abuse, neglect, stress and trauma

Ask:

What is the function of the behavior?
What is it communicating?

An example:
The child who starts coloring a page and then suddenly stops, rips it up and throws it on the floor…
Relationships

• How can my relationship—or the relationships of other staff with this child—be used to support her?

What can we do to make a difference in this situation?

The major question…

What is under our control?

• It became clear Natalie could benefit from a special buddy
  • “Who does Natalie like?”
  • “Robert, do you see her coming to you?”

A significant adult:

• Has a lot of patience
• Looks for clues
• Gives the child choices
• Is warm, caring and nurturing

Attachment

• We are biologically geared to attach - for safety and survival
• Primary caregivers are first object of attachment
• Teachers and childcare providers can provide the safety and nurturing that young children need

Attachment is a mutual, reciprocal relationship in which the child becomes a knowing partner. It is a relationship that develops gradually during the early months and years of a child’s life.

Child-Adult Attachment: A Lens for Viewing Decisions that Affect Children and Families, Lyn Glen and Martha Farrell Erickson, Ph.D.
Attachment

- We are biologically geared to attach - for safety and survival
- Primary caregivers are first object of attachment
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Shared Emotional Experience

- Personalized, individual attention is critical.
- Adults are not interchangeable.
- One adult forms a relationship to support the child’s emotional and cognitive development.
- The child has a meaningful experience with a particular adult over time.
- It is shared emotional experience that builds resilience in children.

An experience that provides “repair” is about:

- changing the environment so that the child can grow socially and emotionally
- providing opportunities for the child to learn new social/emotional and educational skills.
- We may not be able to change the child’s home environment.
- We can create an emotionally safe environment while the child is with us.

A significant adult:

- Is consistently available
- Sees the world from the child’s point of view
- Sets limits
- Structures the child’s experience

What we don’t often acknowledge:

- Some of us work better with certain children than with other children and
- Some of us like certain children better than other children.

ALSO:
- Some children like us better than other children.

Who likes this child? Who does this child like?

- Gave rise to a powerful intervention
- Gave staff an opportunity to reflect on
  - who they are as individuals and
  - what they bring to the educational setting
Changes in Natalie—a child who had been considered inappropriate for the setting
• Beginning to relate well to others
• Much more animated
• Developing a consistent personality
• Getting a lot of pleasure out of life
• Changes are still difficult
• She needs a certain amount of space
• She has learned to trust

What informs successful interventions for Natalie?
We consider the impact of:
• Life circumstances/events
• Setting events
• Function and communication
• Relationships

Going Around the Circle
• What’s the concern?
• Why do you think it is happening?
• What do you think the behavior is communicating?
• How can we help? What’s the plan?
• How is it going?

How young children feel is as important as how they think, particularly with regard to school readiness.

Link between:
• Cognition - thinking and learning - as in reading, writing and arithmetic
• Social emotional development - emotion regulation, knowing ourselves, developing social skills - friendships

Language, Literacy and Social-Emotional Development
• Hearing words allows a baby to self-regulate.
• Saying words allows a toddler to self-regulate.
• Expressing ideas helps a preschooler to self-regulate.
Opportunities within our control to nurture successful kids:

- Use of the physical space
- Effective use of our time
- Emotional support in relationships:
  - With the child
  - With the parents
  - Between the child and other children
  - Between us and other staff

You can control the experience the child has with you.

You can change their life forever... and you probably won’t know for sure that you did.

Adults...

- Do with
- Do for
- Stand back and admire

Julie Ribaudo, President
Michigan Assn. for Infant Mental Health

“...The goal is to see the child not as an object to be changed, but as a potential author of her own change.”

Carol Cole, Project Leader
Project Relationship

ON-LINE TRAINING

- Introduction to Infant Mental Health
- Addressing the Needs of Children Who Engage in Challenging Behavior
- Relationship-Based Teaching with Young Children
- Bridging Education and Mental Health

Successful Kids
http://education.umn.edu/ceed/

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