

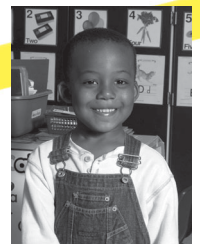
Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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Helping Children Express Their Wants and Needs

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS



Helping Children Express Their Wants and Needs

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed for in-service providers and others who conduct staff development activities. Those who are responsible for professional development should find them useful in sharing information with professionals and parents to help teachers and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. The

Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments. The strategies described in the Briefs are most successful when used in the context of ongoing positive relationships and supportive environments. The strategies are most successful for an individual child when developed based on observation and assessment of the child including information from the family, teacher and other caregivers.

Understanding the Relationship between Communication and Behavior

Communication is the process of exchanging meaning between individuals—by talking or using body language, gestures (pointing, reaching, or giving), facial expressions, joint attention (sharing attention, directing the attention of another person, or following the attention of another person), and vocalizations (grunts and cries). Children need to communicate to get materials, activities, attention, or assistance from others.

There are many types of communication disorders—some involve difficulty in the area of receiving and understanding information while some include problems or delays in expressing and articulating information. Children with communication delays often exhibit challenging behaviors when their needs are not met. Because of the children’s limited communication skills, their caregivers misinterpret or fail to notice their communication attempts. However, as children learn to communicate better and caregivers learn to recognize and respond to children’s communication, these challenging behaviors often subside. Behaviors that indicate that a child might have communication problems include using a limited number of words, having difficulty understanding concepts in the environment, having difficulty following directions, and demonstrating frustration when trying to communicate.

Robbie is an inquisitive 3-year-old boy with a wonderful smile. At home and school when he has difficulty communicating with others, he sometimes uses challenging behavior. Robbie’s mother, preschool teacher, and the speech-language pathologist met recently to discuss their concerns about Robbie’s behavior.

At home, Robbie has trouble at dinnertime. He often resists getting ready for mealtime because he does not want to stop what he is doing. On days when he more easily leaves his previous activity to come to dinner, he skips important steps, such as washing his hands. His mother is frustrated with his need for constant redirection and prompting. At school, Ms. Mozie sees that when

Robbie is upset, he exhibits challenging behavior, including hitting other children during transitions and snack. Ms. Mozie sees Robbie’s and the other children’s frustration but is unsure how to help.

During a parent-teacher conference, the three adults determine that communication is at the heart of Robbie’s challenging behaviors. Robbie seems to have difficulty communicating his needs to others and difficulty processing directions and complex language. To help Robbie, they decide to try several strategies at home and in the classroom to teach him new ways to express himself and perhaps reduce difficult behavior.

Facilitating Communication to Prevent Challenging Behavior

Teachers and other caregivers can use several strategies to facilitate a child’s communication skills and help prevent challenging behavior. These strategies include (1) reading the child’s body language, (2) providing the child with choices, (3) providing picture schedules to help the child move easily between activities, (4) segmenting multiple-step directions and providing cues so the child better understands the expectations, and (5) modeling communication skills. When using these strategies, it is suggested that teachers and other caregivers consult with families to determine what is culturally appropriate for the child and the family. It is also essential to identify strategies that parents can naturally use to support the child’s communication skills and decrease challenging behaviors at home and in the community.

- ✓ Reading a child’s body language is essential, especially when the child has limited ways to communicate. Children who have a limited vocabulary might use gestures (e.g., pointing to an object) or eye gaze to let others know what they need or want. When there is a consistent and immediate response to nonverbal behaviors by caregivers or peers, a child is less likely to become frustrated and engage in challenging behavior. For example, Dante has limited verbal skills but often communicates by looking at what he

wants and then looking at an adult. When his parents or teachers are busy and do not respond to his attempts to communicate, Dante begins whining.

- ✓ Providing a child with choices gives the child the opportunity to communicate what he wants rather than using inappropriate behavior to communicate. When teaching children to make choices, the adult provides the child with different objects, activities, or photographs from which the child can choose. The adult should select items that are motivating or reinforcing to the child and that are acceptable to the adult (e.g., if one choice is to go outside and play baseball, the adult has to agree to play should the child select this option). The number of items to offer depends on the individual child. Typically offering only two choices is an ideal starting point. Too many options can increase a child's frustration.
- ✓ Using picture schedules can also benefit many children with challenging behaviors. Children often use challenging behaviors when they do not understand what is going on in the environment. Presenting the child with a picture schedule prior to a change in activity increases the likelihood that the child will understand what to do and will engage in appropriate behaviors during the transition from one activity to the next. This strategy takes time and consistency until the child understands the purpose of the picture schedule (receptive communication). The entire class can be included in this strategy to facilitate transitions. For instance, Jeffrey has a difficult time following the schedule of the classroom. His teacher, Mr. Jung, makes a picture schedule for Jeffrey. Mr. Jung takes pictures of things in the room that represent every activity throughout the day and posts the pictures in a line on the wall. Prior to each transition, an adult takes Jeffrey to the pictures, shows him which activity is finished, prompts him to turn the picture of that activity over, and then points to the next activity. Sometimes Jeffrey will go over and look at the pictures on his own.
- ✓ Segmenting multiple-step directions and providing cues can help children understand the direction and thus increase the likelihood that they will follow the direction. When children do not follow directions, it may be because they do not understand the direction. Segmenting involves breaking a task down into smaller, more easily understood, parts. For example, rather than telling Jacob "Go wash your hands," Jacob's mother could walk him through the steps associated with the more general direction: "Let's get our hands wet. Now let's put soap on our hands" and so on. Cues are behaviors provided by caregivers or peers to help a child understand what is expected in a particular context. Cues can be verbal (e.g., "Turn on the water first"), pictorial (e.g., showing a picture of a child turning on the water), or nonverbal (e.g., demonstrating how to wash hands, pointing to the faucet when telling the child to turn on the water).
- ✓ Providing language models and labeling (e.g., single-word vocabulary and multiple-word combinations) is another strategy to increase children's communication skills and decrease the likelihood of challenging behavior. By modeling simple phrases and supporting children's use of more complex phrases, children can learn new communication skills, which can be applied in different contexts. For example, labeling tasks, activities, and objects, and

incorporating the labels into classroom activities, increase the likelihood that children will understand and be able to talk about things in their environment. Repetition across different contexts can increase the likelihood that children will use vocabulary appropriately (e.g., "Want more juice," "More book," "Need more music").

Ms. Mozie decided to try different ways to facilitate Robbie's expressive and receptive communication skills to help him engage in more appropriate behaviors. When Robbie wanted more cookies during snack time, she noticed that he caught her attention by pointing to the tray of cookies and pretending to eat a cookie. Ms. Mozie responded by giving the cookie to him. Later, Robbie pointed and whined while gazing at several different foods. When Ms. Mozie asked him what he wanted, Robbie did not have the words to say that he wanted the applesauce. However, when she provided Robbie with a choice of applesauce or carrots, he immediately pointed to the applesauce. Without hesitating, Ms. Mozie gave Robbie some applesauce while modeling the word "applesauce." She saw that when given a choice, Robbie was calmer and did not get as frustrated during snack time.

However, Robbie still had difficulty understanding directions and making the transitions between activities at school. Based on the speech-language pathologist's advice, Ms. Mozie decided that a portable picture schedule for Robbie would help him move more easily from activity to activity. She created 4-by-6-inch photographs of each activity and placed them in a pocket photo album. When one activity, such as choice time, was coming to an end, Ms. Mozie showed Robbie a picture of a set of toys and flipped it to the next activity, story time. This helped Robbie know that choice time was ending in 3 minutes and to begin cleaning up and moving to the rug for story time. Ms. Mozie used this strategy for subsequent transitions throughout the day. Over time, as the picture schedule was used more consistently, Robbie's anticipation and acceptance of the end of activities increased, and his challenging behaviors during transitions decreased.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in These Interventions?

The children who have participated in these interventions include children who exhibit a range of disabilities from language delays to autism. Many of the participants were of European American descent and from middle-class backgrounds. Some studies included participants from African American, Latino, and Asian backgrounds. Recent studies have included preschoolers who were at-risk and from low-income families. Further research is necessary to determine what other strategies could be useful in helping children communicate their wants and needs, keeping in mind the cultural backgrounds and beliefs of the families.



We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.

Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

for additional resources.

Information on helping children express their wants and needs is available in the following articles:

- Howard, S., Shaughnessy, A., Sanger, D., & Hux, K. (1998). Lets talk! Facilitating language in early elementary classrooms. *Young Children*, 53(3), 34-39.
- Kaiser, A. P., & Delaney, E. M. (2001). Responsive conversations: Creating opportunities for naturalistic language teaching (pp. 13-23). In M. Ostrosky & S. Sandall (Eds.), *Young exceptional children monograph series no. 3: Teaching strategies: What to do to support young children's development*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- McCathren, R. B., & Watson, A. L. (2001). Facilitating the development of intentional communication (pp. 25-35). In M. Ostrosky & S. Sandall (Eds.), *Young exceptional children monograph series no. 3: Teaching strategies: What to do to support young children's development*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Ostrosky, M. M., & Kaiser, A. P. (1991). Preschool classroom environments that promote communication. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 23(4), 7-10.
- Utah State University. (1998). *Strategies for preschool intervention in everyday settings (SPIES) curriculum*. Logan, UT: Author.

What is the Scientific Basis for the Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following articles have documented the scientific basis on helping children express their wants and needs:

- Del'Homme, M. A., Sinclair, E., & Kasari, C. (1994). Preschool children with behavioral problems: Observation in instructional and free play contexts. *Behavioral Disorders*, 19(3), 221-232.
- Harden, B. J., Winslow, M. B., Kendziora, K. T., Shahinfar, A., Rubin, K. H., Fox, N. A., Crowley, M. J., & Zahn-Waxler, C. (2000). Externalizing problems in Head Start children: An ecological exploration. *Early Education and Development*, 11(3), 357-385.
- Hart, B. (1985). Naturalistic language techniques. In S. F. Warren & A. K. Rogers-Warren (Eds.), *Teaching functional language: Generalization and maintenance of language skills* (pp. 63-88). Baltimore: Brookes.
- Kaiser, A. P., Cai, X., Hancock, T. B., & Foster, E. M. (2002). Teacher-reported behavior problems and language delays in boys and girls enrolled in Head Start. *Behavioral Disorders*, 28(1), 23-39.
- Prizant, B. M., Wetherby, A. M., & Roberts, J. E. (2000). Communication problems. In C. H. Zeanah, Jr. (Ed.), *Handbook of infant mental health* (2nd ed., pp. 3-19). New York: Guilford Press.
- Qi, C. H., & Kaiser, A. P. (2004). Problem behaviors of low-income children with language delays: An observation study. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 47(3), 595-609.

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