

What to do when your child isn't behaving at school

I am frequently asked for help from parents, who have been notified by their child's school, that there is a behavior problem with their child in the classroom. The problem can range from a lack of cooperation, to challenging peer interactions, to hitting peers or the teacher. The teacher is frustrated because she is running out of solutions. She may feel like there is a possibility that the behavior problem could be rooted in something that is going on at home, such as family changes, behavior tolerance, etc., and she wants the parent to help resolve it so the child can remain enrolled at the school. On the other hand, the parent is equally frustrated because she may feel like a problem has been dropped in her lap that she is powerless to solve. The parents oftentimes don't see the same behavior issue at home and might feel like it is caused by something in the classroom, such as another child, the teacher, or changes in the classroom setting. Next, the school may issue a warning to the parents, indicating that if the behavior doesn't change soon, the child will not be allowed to continue attending the school or a recommendation will be made to hold the child back one year.

When my oldest daughter was four years old and enrolled in a day care center, her leadership skills began to show early when she began disrupting her classroom group and others by redirecting the activities. Several years later when she was in first grade, I was notified by her teacher that she was not focusing on her class work and pestering other children around her. In both situations, the school staff was on the verge of giving up. Interestingly enough, 24 years later, my daughter was faced with the same predicament when my granddaughter's kindergarten teacher confronted her mother with the same problem.

When parents are first engaged by the teacher in this problem, it can be overwhelming and frustrating. Fearful thoughts begin running through their minds, such as, *my child has development issues, she will never have positive relationships, he needs therapy, I can't afford another school, I'll have to quit my job to stay home with her.* Some parents may even feel defensive at first and then powerless in stopping a behavior that is outside of the home. It should be assumed that as a professional, the teacher has used all of her classroom discipline tools to diminish the behavior and is turning to the parents as a last resort for help. She may be suggesting that the behavior issue could be rooted in something going on at home and only the parents can fix it.

Through one-on-one parent coaching sessions with parents who contact me on this matter, my first step is to help them determine if this issue could possibly be a learned behavior or a result of family changes. The three most common motives for this challenging behavior are; the child might be acting out to create a result, they are imitating a behavior they have seen, or they are not getting enough rest or nutrition. In the first case, a learned behavior that creates a result is termed by psychologists as operant conditioning; the child has learned that if they behave in a particular way, they can create a result. For example, if the child doesn't cooperate, it makes the teacher raise her voice or the child gets special attention. In the second case, a learned behavior the child saw somewhere is termed by psychologists as observational learning; the child witnesses an interesting behavior demonstrated by someone else and experiments by imitating that same behavior. For example, the child witnesses hitting and imitates it with his peers in the classroom. Finally, a child needs adequate rest and nutrition in his diet. If there are deficiencies in this area of biological needs, the child may get tired at school and act out, be less engaged in the classroom activities, or be less cooperative due to feelings beyond their control.

I encourage the parents to think of any possibilities that could be influencing the child, such as marital issues, parent behavior, influences from other family members, too much entertainment electronics (television, computer or video games), or not enough boundaries and patterns around sleep and eating. If the parent is able to come up with some possible causes, I help them build an action plan to address them immediately. The parent should then share their plan with the teacher to demonstrate they are working on solving the issue.

If the parent is not able to offer any influences away from the classroom, my next step is to help the parent determine if this behavior requires help from a professional, such as a behavior specialist or a therapist. If not, then I feel that the ownership is on the teacher to develop a plan to address this behavior. If the teacher feels that she is unable to solve it using her skills and experience and it is a preschool, then perhaps the child is just not ready for the classroom environment and the parent may have to make other arrangements or find a school with a different environment. Montessori, for example, is not a match for every child and some children act out because they don't have enough language to express their emotions in words. What about the environment, is it too structured for the child or not structured enough? Finally, some students begin to have behavior problems that are really a mask for their struggle with academics. If the child is in an elementary school, the teacher should pull together a team made up of the school psychologist, other pertinent school staff, and the parents, to come up with an action plan. Having people with different areas of expertise and various experiences with the child gives a better picture of what will work. Assistant teachers and playground or lunchroom monitors often have noticed things about a child that others don't see.

If you find yourself faced with a similar situation as a parent or a teacher, the first step is to keep an open mind and be ready to brainstorm on possibilities to solve this problem with everyone on the team. Take the time to understand the child's learning style and be sure that the learning structure in the classroom is a good match. Look for professionals who could join the team and provide observation of the child to get a handle on the classroom climate. Many times there are dynamics involved that haven't yet been noticed...moving from center to center before a child is ready, working with a peer who is not a good match, etc. Be ready to come into meetings with an open mind. Getting defensive or being too quick to explain away the behavior will be counterproductive. If classroom or language/learning issues can be ruled out, a different approach might be necessary. Although I generally discourage reward systems, creating motivations works best to help "kick start" appropriate behavior. Younger kids will work hard for stickers, while older students can work for extra computer time or special time with mom or dad. Whatever is motivating for the child and is easy for everyone to be consistent about, may be possible solutions. Breaking down the day into a few time periods gives a child a chance to earn rewards and keeps them motivated to try. This also gives the adults a chance to look at the day in separate segments to see if there are consistent problems in one time period or another. In the beginning, only rewards should be used - that way the team can focus on the behavior they do want, not the one you don't. Then over time, the child is asked to show the desired behaviors for longer periods until you can phase out the rewards all together.

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