



How to Plan Activities to Reduce Challenging Behaviour

All children communicate using challenging behaviour at times. Each child is unique, meaning that there is no one strategy that will prevent challenging behaviour for every child, every time. However, intentional planning to support your child's social and emotional development can significantly help.



You can plan activities to help your child learn important skills like sharing, taking turns, or handling disappointment. You can also plan ahead to prepare them for events in their life such as changes in schedule, a road trip, a new baby or a visit from grandparents. As an example, Abby is 3 years old and is usually happy at preschool where she loves to draw and play with blocks. However, at home when Abby plays with another child, she often ends up throwing blocks, screaming “Mine!” or crying. Abby’s mom can plan activities to show Abby how to share and take turns and then provide lots of opportunities to practice.

Suggestions for Families

Show your child exactly what to do. Simply asking them to “share” or “be nice” does not help them see what that looks like. For example, if Abby throws her toys, her mom can say, “Abby, please play with the blocks on the floor or on the table.” If Abby gets angry and hits her friend, her mom can say, “Hands are for playing, eating, and hugging. You can say, ‘I am angry. Help, please’.”

Visual routines can help your child understand expectations. Consider using photos or other visual aids to walk them through the steps of an activity before you start.

Intentionally create situations where they can practice the desired behaviour. For example, Abby’s mom can help her learn to take turns while playing with her sister or an older friend as a peer model. Abby’s mom provides the toy and reminds them to take turns. They can practice the skill of sharing during their time together.

Notice when your child uses a skill! For example, “Wow, I saw you share the sand toys at the park with those two girls. What a great friend you are!”

Prepare your child before an event. For example, Abby's mom can say, "Abby, your friend Ella is coming over to play today. When friends come over, we share our toys. I know how special Doggy is to you. We could put Doggy in a safe place where you do not have to share her."

If you know your child might have problems when playing with other children, stay nearby to support your child as needed. You might also provide two sets of a toy (e.g., two bubble wands or two balls) to defuse difficult situations.

Suggestions for Educators

Early learning environments offer many opportunities for children to practice social skills. Educators set up activities where children can practice sharing and taking turns. As children interact with their peers, educators can notice, name, and nurture what they observe. For example, "Abby, I see you're pointing to the red marker. You can tap Jacob on the shoulder and say, 'Can I have a turn?'" After the interaction, the educator can provide encouragement. For example, "Way to go! Abby and Jacob, you are working together to share and take turns!"

Educators can also use daily schedule changes to teach the skill of handling disappointment. For example, "Oh no, Miss Marcie is not here today. We won't be able to go to music. I am really disappointed. What should we do?" At this point, the children can learn to problem solve and come up with a positive solution.

The Bottom Line

Much of the frustration parents experience can be avoided by planning ahead and practicing social and emotional skills with children before a difficult situation occurs. When you are unprepared for your child's strong reaction in a challenging situation, you might respond with an emotional unplanned reaction. Remember that you can build practice opportunities into your daily routine. If your child needs support with activities or routines, you can plan activities that will give them the opportunity to learn the social skills they need. Planning ahead can reduce challenging behaviour and increase positive interactions. Planning activities that help children learn skills such as sharing and taking turns will help your child engage in more positive interactions. This will lead to increased confidence, self-esteem and life-long success.

