

Responding to Challenging Behavior

Evidence-based strategies that build children's social-emotional skills — not just stop the behavior in the moment.

“ Challenging behavior is **communication**. Before reacting, ask: *What is this child trying to tell me?* Behind big behaviors are unmet needs, undeveloped skills, or a nervous system that needs help calming down.

01 How Teachers Can Respond



CONNECT FIRST

Connect Before You Correct

Get down to the child's eye level, name what they're feeling, and stay calm and steady. Regulation is contagious — a calm adult body helps a child's nervous system settle before any teaching can happen.



TEACH THE SKILL

Redirect & Teach What TO Do

Show the child the skill they're missing — words for big feelings, a calm-down spot, or a simple choice. Challenging behavior often signals a skill that hasn't been taught yet, not defiance.



PREVENT

Catch Them Being Good

Give frequent, specific, positive attention for the behavior you want repeated — "You used your words to ask for a turn!" — throughout the day, not only after something goes wrong.



Why Negative Attention Still "Works"

Children are wired to seek connection. When positive attention is scarce, **any** attention — even a raised voice, a scolding, or a lecture — can reinforce a behavior, because it still meets the child's need to be seen. A child who rarely hears "yes" may learn that acting out is the most reliable way to get noticed, and the behavior increases rather than fades.

Remember: the goal isn't *no* attention — it's the *right* attention. Withhold your reaction to the behavior, never your warmth for the child. Shift your attention toward them the moment things start going right.

BEST PRACTICE

The Bigger Picture

These strategies reflect **NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice** and the **CSEFEL Pyramid Model**: nurturing relationships and supportive environments come first, social-emotional skills are explicitly taught, and individualized support is reserved for children who need more. The aim is always to grow a child's social-emotional competence — not just gain compliance in the moment.