Effective Discipline Policies

How to Create a System that Supports
Young Children's Social-Emotional Competence

Sascha Longstreth, PhD,
and Sarah Garrity, EdD

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Acknowledgments

From Sascha:

Thank you to my writing partner, Sarah, who has been a constant source of inspiration and joy throughout the writing journey. My family, especially Chris, Ethan, and Olivia, motivate me every day to become a better version of myself. I thank them for their ongoing love and support. Finally, I wish to thank all of the students who live the words in this book each day, for their hope and resilience—this book is for you.

From Sarah:

I would first like to thank all of the children, families, teachers, administrators, and early intervention specialists I have worked with and learned from over the years and who inspired me to write this book. To my family, John, Kyle, and Miles, thanks for always thinking I can do anything, even if it sounds crazy. Sascha, you are the other pea in my pod, the second half of my brain, and my third and fourth hand—we actually did this!

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Introduction

There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

—Deepak Chopra, author

What type of future do you imagine for the children in your early childhood program? Most of us who enter the field do so because we see the unlimited promise of childhood and have a real passion for helping children reach their full potential.

Unfortunately, however, caring for and educating young children is no easy task, especially when children exhibit challenging behaviors. During our many years in the field, we have seen children kick, hit, bite, spit, and engage in many other troubling behaviors. We have also seen passionate and talented teachers and administrators leave the field because of stress and burnout. Think for a moment about what the door to the future looks like in your early childhood program. Do some children walk confidently through the door, ready to take on the world? For other children, is the door so heavy that it appears to be made of steel? What does this door look like for families? for teachers? for you?

Caring for and educating young children in early childhood programs is rewarding yet difficult work, and we believe it is critical that systems are in place to support children, families, and staff to be their very best. Effective, high-quality behavior-guidance policies are one way to support both teaching and learning and to prevent and address challenging behaviors in early childhood settings. For the past ten years, we have been reviewing the research on effective behavior-guidance practices and have examined hundreds of behavior-guidance policies collected from early childhood programs across the United States. During this time, it has become clear to us that programs need help developing high-quality behavior-guidance policies that reflect evidence-based practices. Effective behavior-guidance policies provide administrators with a blueprint that helps them build an infrastructure that supports the social, emotional, and academic success of all children. We believe that a systematic and intentional approach to behavior guidance can ensure that:

- evidence-based classroom practices for preventing and addressing challenging behaviors are consistently implemented across classrooms, resulting in a positive social-emotional climate and better child outcomes;

- relationships with families are meaningful, authentic, and strengths based;

- professional development is in line with program goals and best-practice recommendations; and

- decision making is fair and equitable.

Although there has been a great deal of research conducted on challenging behavior during the past twenty years, it is too time-consuming to sort through the evidence on best practices to figure out what is *essential* to include in a behavior-guidance policy. For this reason, we developed the Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC). The TAGPEC is an easy-to-use, thirty-item checklist that describes seven essential features of high-quality behavior-guidance policies for programs serving children from birth to eight years of age. We developed the

TAGPEC via an extensive review of the literature in the fields of general education, special education, early childhood education, early care and education, early childhood special education, educational administration, and school psychology and have refined it over the last several years through on our ongoing research project.

Overview of the Book

In chapter two, we present our philosophical approach to behavior guidance and discuss the five assumptions that are at the core of the TAGPEC. Because we feel so strongly about the critical importance of viewing children's culture and language as both strengths and teaching tools, chapter three describes how high-quality behavior-guidance policies can provide a blueprint for culturally relevant classroom practices and equitable decision making. Chapter four presents a research overview of the seven essential features of the TAGPEC, providing examples of how policy language can be crafted for each essential feature. In chapter six, we introduce a simple, five-step process for creating a high-quality behavior-guidance policy and, finally, in chapter seven, we hear from a pediatrician and a child psychiatrist team who explain the intricate connection between early childhood trauma and behavior.

A special introduction and some background information are needed regarding chapter seven, entitled "The Impact of Early Childhood Trauma on Children's Behavior and Adjustment." While we both feel as if we have the experience, academic training, and passion needed to guide programs to develop high-quality behavior-guidance policies that reflect the current research, our experience and training also tell us that there are some children who need intensive, comprehensive mental-health services that cannot always be provided in a typical early childhood setting. Because we felt so strongly about the need to address the reality and seriousness of early childhood trauma and the importance of early intervention in a book about challenging behavior, we asked our colleagues Dr. Pradeep Gidwani, a pediatrician, and Jeff Rowe, a clinical psychologist, to write our final chapter on trauma. If we are to build a true infrastructure of support for children, we must include everyone—teachers, administrators, program staff, families, early interventionists, and the early childhood mental-health community.

We hope that early childhood educators can use this book and the TAGPEC as a blueprint to help their program build an infrastructure that supports the social, emotional, and academic success of all children by providing guidance on how policy can be used to prevent and address challenging behaviors in the early years. Children do not walk through the door to the future on their own—they rely on dedicated, knowledgeable, and passionate educators who work together to teach children the skills they need to become successful, happy, and productive adults.

A Call to Action:

The Need for Effective, High-Quality Behavior-Guidance Policies in Early Childhood Settings

Over the past three years, Ms. Marina has taught four-year-olds. This is her first year teaching in a three-year-old classroom. As in the past, she developed classroom expectations and posted them on the wall. She reviews the rules each morning during circle time, during transitions, and when one or more of the children are having a hard time following the expectations. Although most of the children are following the rules, Zaryn is having difficulty. He constantly interrupts during circle and small-group time to share personal stories and questions, and he has a difficult time with the classroom expectations of sharing and taking turns. He speaks out of turn so often that the other children are left feeling frustrated.

During the past two weeks, Zaryn has begun pinching the other children during circle time. This afternoon, the director told Ms. Marina that the classroom parents are beginning to complain. Ms. Marina would like to help Zaryn learn how to better share and take turns so that other children have a turn to participate, but he seems to need extra time to do this. Ms. Marina feels torn between caring for the needs of all the children and taking the extra time to help Zaryn.

Unfortunately, scenarios such as these can be quite common in early childhood classrooms. During our years working as teachers, administrators, consultants, coaches, and higher-education faculty, we have experienced the stress, chaos, and emotions that result from children's challenging behavior. Many of the vignettes in this book come from our personal experiences working in the field. The vignette above, for example, comes from Sascha's experience working as a behavior consultant in an early childhood program. Challenging behavior is no fun for anyone, and the fact that you are reading this book right now means you are interested in learning more about how to prevent and address challenging behavior in early childhood settings.

Challenging behavior has been defined as "any repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with children's engagement in social interactions and learning and may include physical and verbal aggressions, prolonged tantrums, property destruction, self-injury, noncompliance, disruptive vocal and motor behavior, and withdrawal" (Powell, Fixsen, and Dunlap, 2003). Importantly, challenging behavior in the early years impedes learning, puts a child at high risk for later school failure, and is one of the strongest predictors of more serious problem behaviors in adolescence and adulthood, including mental health

problems, delinquency, and engagement in criminal and violent activities (NRC and IOM, 2009). Not surprisingly, children's challenging behaviors are often listed as the number one concern of early childhood teachers and can lead to burnout, stress, and skilled and passionate teachers leaving the field. Administrators and families are also affected by children's challenging behavior. Recently, Sarah was in a community meeting and a principal looked at his phone, turned to her, and said, "Sorry, I have to leave. We have a child in one of our kindergarten classrooms who has been biting the other children, and the parent is waiting to speak to me." Sarah wondered, "Is he meeting the parent of the child who is biting or a parent of a child who has been bitten?" Both scenarios are possible and reflect just one of the many challenges faced by teachers, administrators, and families when dealing with challenging behaviors.

Recently, troubling data on preschool suspension and expulsion rates, as well as data indicating that young boys of color and young children with disabilities are suspended and expelled for behavioral challenges three to four times as often as other children (Office of Civil Rights, 2014), has received a great deal of national attention and has served as a wake-up call to the early childhood community. It is important to note that we define

early childhood programs as those serving children from birth to age eight in a variety of settings—infant-toddler programs, public pre-school programs including state preschool and Head Start, family child care homes, K–3 classrooms, campus child care centers, and private and for-profit early childhood edu-cation (ECE) programs. The National Asso-ciation for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood programs as those serving children from birth to age eight, and there is a growing interest in how children and families can be served by pro-gramming that reflects this age range.

The period of birth to eight years is unique in that it is a time of rapid development during which children learn many of the skills need-ed be successful in school, the workplace, and life. The development of self-regulation, the use of increasingly complex language, and the ability to think critically to both ask and solve problems are all hallmarks of this developmental period. Moreover, the development of the skills needed to make and keep friends, a positive self-identity and self-esteem, and a strong sense of oneself as a learner all have their roots in early childhood. For these reasons, it is critical that adults sup-port young children to become the very best they can be and that systems are in place to support teachers, administrators, and families as they go about this very important task. Fortunately, a great deal of information, based on years of research, is available that identi-fies practices and strategies shown to prevent and address challenging behaviors in young children. Unfortunately, however, these strate-gies are not being implemented on a consis-tent basis, as evidenced by the prevalence of challenging behavior, high rates of suspen-sion and expulsion, and the identification of a "discipline gap" that calls attention to the troubling racial disparities in suspension and expulsion rates of children of color and those with disabilities. **Clearly, what we are doing is not working.** So what can be done? What steps can program leaders take to ensure that practices known to prevent and address challenging behavior are implemented in early childhood classrooms?

Effective, High-Quality Behavior-Guidance Policies

We propose that the use of high-quality behavior-guidance policies can help adminis-trators ensure that *all* children learn the social and emotional skills needed to be successful. To be considered "high-quality," guidance policies first need to promote practices that are developmentally and culturally appro-priate and, second, need be grounded in research on evidence-based practices. While this definition may seem simple at first, we believe that it is too broad for administrators to use when designing a guidance policy. For example, what exactly is meant by *develop-mentally and culturally appropriate?* How can administrators translate this into policy? There has been a great deal of research conducted on challenging behavior in the early years, and we believe that it is too time-consuming for administrators to sort through the evi-dence on best practices to figure out what is essential for a program guidance policy. Moreover, the information available is not always based on the research and/or may provide conflicting recommendations based on ideology and/or personal experience and beliefs rather than evidence. (Consider, for example, the practice of time-out, which is a hotly debated topic in the literature). Clearly, given the troubling data on preschool sus-pension and expulsion and the lack of clarity as to what represents best practices, more support is needed to help administrators develop and implement effective policies that address challenging behavior.

The purpose of this book is to meet this need by providing clear, evidence-based information to early childhood program administrators about how to develop and implement high-quality behavior-guidance policies that support teaching and learning and prevent and address challenging behaviors. Since 2006, we have been reviewing the literature on effective behavior-guidance practices and have examined almost 400 behavior-guidance policies collected from early childhood programs across the United States. In this book, we share what we have learned to support early childhood administrators and program leaders in developing effective behavior-guidance policies that will help create and sustain a positive social-emotional climate and support the social, emotional, and academic success of all students.

Before we begin, however, it is important to note that we intentionally use the term *behavior-guidance policy* rather than discipline policy throughout this book; this distinction is key to our philosophical approach. While the Latin root of the word "discipline" means *discipulus* or pupil, its meaning has evolved over the years to be synonymous with punishment. Rather than trying to prevent challenging behaviors from occurring, many discipline policies focus on what will happen *after* the challenging behavior has already

occurred. In contrast, behavior guidance is preventative and refers to the practice of teaching children social-emotional skills such as self-regulation, cooperation, empathy, and responsibility. In this way, both prevention and teaching are central to the definition of behavior guidance. We believe that high-quality behavior-guidance policies can help early childhood program leaders ensure that:

- evidence-based classroom practices for preventing and addressing challenging behaviors are consistently implemented across classrooms, resulting in a positive social emotional climate and better child outcomes;

- relationships with families are meaningful, authentic, and strengths based;

- professional development is in line with program goals and best-practice recommendations; and

- decision making is fair and equitable.

In the following sections, we present information on why having a high-quality behavior-guidance policy is critical to the development of systems and practices that support teachers, administrators, and families as they seek to prevent and address challenging behaviors in early childhood settings.

Behavior-Guidance Policies: A Blueprint for Action

One way that we have come to think about the role of guidance policies in early childhood programs is to imagine them as a blueprint. Much as a blueprint provides an architect with the plans for a building, a guidance policy provides an administrator with a plan for creating an infrastructure that supports the social, emotional, and academic success of all children. Throughout this book, we use the term *infrastructure* to describe the organizational structure needed for the

effective operation of a center or school and to highlight the importance of a systematic approach to behavior guidance.

There are several compelling reasons why we have elected to focus our effort at the policy, or systems, level. Policies are an inherent component of effective and systemic service delivery and represent an intentional set of guiding principles designed to help translate the goals of the system into practice. In this

way, policies provide a blueprint that guides program leaders as they work with their teams to build an infrastructure of support that is necessary if they are to implement practices in line with their mission. Think for a minute about the mission of your program. Does it involve teaching, learning, and supporting children's success? How do your current behavior-guidance policies support your mission? As leaders, administrators are responsible for ensuring that program policies and practices are in line with the mission of the program. Do your policies help or hinder all children to walk through the door to a future that is full of possibility and in which they will reach their full potential?

Current Context of Early Childhood Education

A systems-level approach to behavior guidance is especially important given the current context of ECE in the United States. Early childhood programs represent a hodge-podge of programs—for-profit, nonprofit, faith-based, Head Start, state preschool, co-ops, and family child care homes—many of which have disparate and often commingled, braided, or layered funding streams and programmatic requirements. In addition, universal preschool and transitional kindergarten initiatives mean that more and more preschool-aged children are being served on elementary school campuses. Kagan and colleagues (2007) have described ECE as a "nonsystem" because it lacks the overarching governance, funding, and accountability mechanisms present in the K–12 environment. This lack of infrastructure results in variability in the services provided to young children and their families in terms of quality, accountability, and equity. What this means for children is that some may be suspended or expelled for challenging behaviors while others are not, even if they exhibit the same behavior. In addition, while some programs may have a center, school, or district-wide discipline/guidance policy, in others, teachers, directors, or principals may develop their own policies based on their personal beliefs, experiences, and a real desire to make things better. Little guidance is provided by state licensing agencies, which most often provide information about what programs are prohibited from doing, such as corporal punishment, rather than what they should do to support social-emotional competence. In our reviews of program guidance policies, we have seen a tremendous amount of variability in terms of how challenging behaviors are addressed by program policy and the level of support provided to children, teachers, and families.

The Need for a Systems-Level Approach

Another reason we have decided to focus on policy is because research indicates that a systems-level approach to discipline that is understood by all stakeholders and is applied consistently reduces challenging behaviors and supports children, teachers, administrators, and families. In addition, implementing systems-level policies can be instrumental in helping to ensure that policies are evidence based. Here, we define *evidence based* as "a decision-making process that integrates the best available research evidence with family and professional wisdom and values" (Buysse, Wesley, and Winton, 2006). We have intentionally selected this definition as it reflects our belief that for behavior-guidance policies to be effective, they must take into consideration the local context and must recognize parents as an integral part of the decision-making process. Policies that incor-

porate evidence-based practices known to support young children's social and emotional competence in a systematic and intentional way can guide how administrators, teachers, and families address challenging behaviors and ensure that policies are enacted in ways that are equitable, fair, and support children's success. Like blueprints, policies are not only key in planning programs but are also a critical reference point when decisions need to be made. With a strong blueprint for success in hand, administrators can feel confident that they are taking action to prevent misbehavior from occurring and are addressing it appropriately and fairly when it does occur.

The key role of policy is highlighted by the Teaching Pyramid, a tiered model of support frequently used in early childhood settings to help programs promote social-emotional development and support children's appropriate behavior through the use of evidence-based strategies (Fox et al., 2003). At the base of this model (see Figure 1) are systems and policies that promote and sustain the use of evidence-based practices. In this way, policies are the foundation for the supportive services described at every level of the Teaching Pyramid, reflecting our belief that behavior-guidance policies provide the blueprint needed to build an infrastructure that supports children's social, emotional, and academic success.

Figure 1: The Teaching Pyramid

The Pyramid Model:

Promoting Social and Emotional Competence and Addressing Challenging Behavior
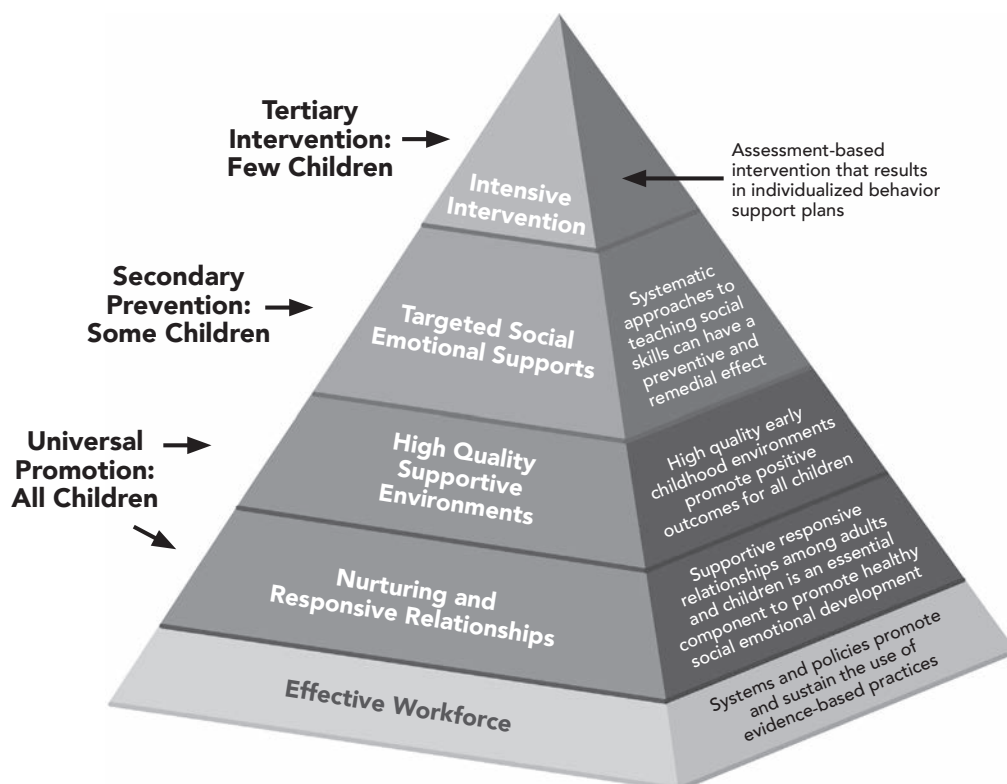
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Reduce challenging behaviors with a nurturing approach to discipline that works

Challenging behaviors can derail an early childhood learning community, and punishment and exclusion are not the answer. Young children need support and instruction to help them learn how to cooperate, listen, share, and interact positively with their peers and with adults. Where to start?

Effective Discipline Policies offers clear, evidence-based information and an easy-to-use checklist to help administrators craft a developmentally appropriate, consistent, effective behavioral-guidance policy that benefits all members of the learning community:

- **For the teacher:** a better classroom environment with fewer challenging behaviors
- **For the child:** a positive climate and nurturing approach that teaches real social skills and builds self-esteem
- **For the administrator:** fewer challenging behaviors, support and clear expectations for teachers, and parents who feel heard and respected
- **For parents and families:** children are learning across all domains, have positive experiences with school, and feel respected and a part of the school community

Sascha Longstreth, PhD, is chair and associate professor in the Department of Child and Family Development at San Diego State University. She began her career as a preschool teacher and has extensive experience in a variety of educational settings. She has worked with the YMCA, Head Start, and Polinsky Children's Center to train early care and education teachers on topics related to infant and early childhood mental health. Dr. Longstreth's research is closely connected to her teaching practice, and she is deeply committed to the exploration of practices that support children's developing social-emotional competence.

Sarah Garrity, EdD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Child and Family Development at San Diego State University. Her research and policy interests focus on early childhood workforce development, educational leadership, and the sociocultural and linguistic contexts of teaching and learning. She has more than 25 years of experience in the field as a classroom teacher, Head Start administrator, and literacy coach. She is an author and presenter on topics related to best practice in early care and education settings.

GH 10543

U.S. $19.95

ISBN 9780876597507

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