

PUSH

PAST

IT!

A Positive
Approach to
Challenging
Classroom
Behaviors

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Table of Contents

Introduction	▶ 1
Chapter 1: Current Approaches to Discipline	▶ 4
Chapter 2: Start with Your Own Self-Regulation	▶ 19
Chapter 3: Thinking about Challenging Behaviors in a Professional Context	▶ 35
Chapter 4: Working with Family Members	▶ 55
Chapter 5: Developmentally Appropriate Behavior for Children Ages One through Six	▶ 66
Chapter 6: Understanding the Role of Trauma in Behavior	▶ 82
Chapter 7: Analyzing Specific Challenging Behaviors	▶ 91
Chapter 8: Setting Up Your Background Supports	▶ 111
Chapter 9: Strategies for Addressing Challenging Behaviors	▶ 120
Chapter 10: Successfully Implementing Strategies	▶ 140
Appendix A: PUSH PAST It Handout	▶ 146
Appendix B: Relationship-Repair Planning Sheet	▶ 147
Appendix C: Behavior Checklist	▶ 148
Appendix D: Meaning-Making Machine Chart (MMMC)	▶ 152
References and Resources	▶ 155
Index	▶ 173



CHAPTER 1 ▶

Current Approaches to Discipline

My journey as an educator began in 1990. I realized I had found my place in the world when I entered the Yellow Room and a three-year-old greeted me by asking what color my thoughts were. Even though I had found my calling, working with young children wasn't easy. I will never forget the day in 1996 when one of the adorable little preschoolers under my care bit a chunk out of the face of a smaller child. As the injured child was carried away on a stretcher, I was left with some very angry parents. I felt a mix of emotions: confusion, helplessness, anger, horror, shame, and embarrassment. But now, after so many years have passed, I don't mind airing my own dirty laundry. As it turned out, my situation was not unique.



Defining the Problem

Children's challenging behaviors—crying, tantrums, biting, swearing, and everything in between—may be the most frequently encountered occupational hazards in teaching young children. In a

review of research from around the world, Paul Frick found that the prevalence of conduct disorder (a long-term pattern of serious behavior problems) does not vary much across continents. Furthermore, when asked about their greatest needs, early childhood professionals highlight one thing above all others: they need training on how to deal with challenging behaviors. Teachers have described challenging behavior as one of the greatest barriers that they encounter in providing quality instruction. As researchers Neal Glasgow and Cathy Hicks and June Zuckerman assert, the ability to prevent and manage aggressive behaviors is frequently what principals, supervisors, and the public focus on when assessing effective teachers.

No pressure, right?

I know the toll that this constant struggle can take. As a new teacher, I felt an enormous amount of stress as the behavior challenges in my classroom began to pile up faster than the traffic on the interstate. I worried constantly about how I was affecting future generations by my inability to either prevent these behaviors in the first place or deal with them effectively when they occurred. I couldn't escape my classroom even in my sleep! I dreamed about children eating my lesson plans or destroying materials during an important classroom observation.

I just didn't get it. Despite all my training and all my efforts, there were new shenanigans to deal with each day. What was I doing wrong? Why couldn't I get my students to behave?

During this time, I received truckloads of well-meaning and often unsolicited suggestions for dealing with challenging behaviors. Unfortunately, I discovered that all this advice can lead to gridlock and actually cause *more* problems. Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

- My principal starts snooping around and finding stuff wrong with me instead of with the child.
- My well-meaning colleague gives me some thick book on dealing with challenging behaviors that I do not have time to read because I am too busy *actually* dealing with challenging behaviors.
- My school's mental-health consultant, Ms. Help Helpington, either regurgitates what I already know or gives me a ridiculous number of ideas. Either way, she leaves me stranded in my classroom without any support to implement her suggestions—not that I could have realistically done that anyway.
- My education coordinator sends me to a bunch of behavior workshops full of irrelevant hypothetical situations and magical unicorns—I mean, impractical solutions—that seem impossible to implement. Often these “professional-development opportunities” chip away at my self-confidence. Meanwhile, back in my classroom, the child whom I left to find more ideas to support is getting worse.

According to research, you are not doing it wrong. It is just *that* hard. A report by Allison Gulamhussein of the Center for Public Education highlights how teachers are bombarded with behavior-management ideas without being given any structures to organize those ideas or any methods to match new techniques to their teaching styles or the needs of their own classrooms. Then, when teachers try these strategies and do not get the results they want, they despondently conclude, “This stuff doesn't work.”

However, there are many factors that play a part in why a strategy becomes successful. You cannot always simply copy someone else's idea and expect to get the same results. My friend, fellow

consultant, and frequent copresenter Antoinette Taylor often uses the phrase “adult assembly required” to explain this concept. I love this analogy because it implies that neither children nor our ideas about children come to us fully formed. Relationships with children and strategies to support them are *built*. Biologically, children contain all the necessary parts to build strong relationships. But, similar to your IKEA dining-room set, *adult* assembly is required. Just like the road construction in Chicago, the assembly of the ideas that support children in this process can take days, weeks, months, or even years to complete. How fast this process goes depends on how good you are at putting it all together and how many parts must be assembled and understood. Later chapters will discuss how you can assemble ideas, match them to your unique needs, and “werk” them out (I will explain that spelling in chapter 8) in your classroom. But before we can explore a new approach to dealing with challenging behavior, we need to examine the approaches that many of you are likely using—and why, despite your best efforts, they are not working.



*There are no perfect solutions—
just solutions that you perfect over time with trial and error.*



Common Approaches to Discipline in Early Childhood Education and Their Drawbacks

Early in my career as a teacher, before I developed PUSH PAST It, I often put the label *challenging* on behaviors that I now know are normal, integral parts of learning and development. Because of this mindset, I didn’t always take time to customize a strategy to a situation and instead went for quick fixes just to make behaviors stop. Some of my past approaches to discipline are quite common among educators. Do you recognize any of them?

REMOVING MATERIALS

Imagine yourself in my classroom back in my teaching days. Is a child eating the seashells in my discovery area? Easy! I remove the seashells! Are two children fighting over a toy? No worries! The toy automatically becomes Ms. Angela’s toy, stashed out of reach on top of my cabinet with other confiscated toys. Problem solved. And thank goodness for fold-and-lock storage cabinets in my centers! When behaviors in a center become too much, I quickly push the two sections of that cabinet together, sealing its materials inside and “closing” that center.

I used these strategies often as a teacher. They provided quick ways to put a stop to challenging behaviors. But I eventually discovered that, even after I removed all problematic items and closed centers where squabbles had broken out, the children soon began fighting over something else. Furthermore, this discipline strategy did not fit with the learning objectives in my lesson plans. Looking back now, I am not sure how I thought my students were ever going to *learn* how to interact with others, *learn* to play appropriately with toys and materials, and *learn* how to cooperate and share materials if I was constantly removing opportunities to practice those skills. For example, how could the children gain experience taking turns with a doll if the doll kept ending up on top of my

cabinet? How could they learn to play appropriately in the discovery center if it was never open or if I kept taking away the interesting objects?

REMOVING A CHILD FROM AN AREA

Imagine yourself in my classroom again. Is a child dousing his friends with cups of water from the sensory table? Easy! I say, “It looks like my friend does not know how to play at the sensory table,” and I make him go to a different area. Is a child knocking down all his friends’ blocks? I announce that it’s time for that child leave the block center.

Granted, if a child is misbehaving in a center, removing him from the center typically does stop that behavior. But I found that when I removed children from areas, some children went willingly, while others put up a fight. This resistance, in turn, only escalated situations. Also, similar to the problems with removing toys or materials, removing a child from his mess or his friends removes the opportunity for him to learn how to clean up a mess or play with friends appropriately. And those are the things we really want him to learn, right?

REMOVING A CHILD FROM A GROUP

Picture my classroom again. Is a child reenacting the latest World Wrestling Entertainment event on my circle-time carpet? Easy! I give my assistant “the nod” to take that child for a “walk”—or, if he has really crossed the line, to the principal’s office. After all, I am usually under a lot of pressure to make circle time a productive learning time, which is hard to do when challenging behaviors disrupt the activities. Why let this one child ruin circle time for everyone else?

I knew a teacher who used this technique so often that when I asked a child from her class what happened when children didn’t listen at circle time, the child said, “They disappear.” After my initial chuckle, I paused. Could I actually be ruining circle time for the rest of the children by not including everyone? When we remove a child from the group, what message are we really sending? If a child chooses to leave, that is one thing, but removing a child sends a message that that child doesn’t belong. It also removes the opportunity for the child to learn how to be with a group and for the group to learn how to interact with that child. To make matters even worse, it undermines a child’s relationship with his classmates and teachers each time he is removed from a classroom.

TAKING AWAY A PRIVILEGE

Let’s go back to my classroom. Is a child pushing in line? That child loses his turn as line leader. Is a child having a bad day and not listening? Easy! I make him sit for two minutes during outside time—or, if he has really been acting up, I take away recess altogether or assign him a seat at lunch away from his friends. I think, “That will make him think twice before he misbehaves again!”

However, I discovered that when I used these discipline techniques, I was actually punishing myself. After losing privileges, children frequently behaved worse than before. As I gained a better understanding of child development, I began to understand that taking away a privilege does not teach children to control their emotions or impulses. *Taking away a privilege only works if a child already has the necessary self-regulation skills to demonstrate the appropriate behavior.* Young children need lots of opportunities to develop these skills. Is it really fair to punish children for not demonstrating skills that they have not yet mastered?

In fact, for a child who does not yet have these skills, taking away a privilege can actually make the situation worse in two ways. First, this punishment may remove an opportunity for the child to let off some steam and thereby improve his behavior. This is why recess is not an optional reward but an important time of the day. Second, the child may become upset over the lost privilege and continue to engage in the challenging behavior because he (still) does not know a more appropriate way to vent his feelings. For example, if Max hits another child and loses the privilege of sitting with friends at lunch, he may become angry, hit someone else, and lose the chance to sit with his friends tomorrow. This cycle of hitting and sitting alone can lead to a pattern of Max being isolated from his peers.

PUTTING A CHILD IN TIME-OUT

Let's return to my classroom one more time. Is a child hitting or pushing his friends or not cleaning up? Easy! I give him a time-out in the thinking chair to ponder what he has done and what he should do differently.

Time-out is a time-honored disciplinary technique for young children. But what educators sometimes forget is that young children are still developing self-awareness. As a result, they usually do not have the cognitive capacity to reflect on their own behavior, so they need help understanding how their behavior affects others. Thus, sitting alone in time-out is not likely to teach a child how to behave better.

(For those who are about to jump in to defend time-out, I am all for a calm, safe, or quiet space that a child goes to *voluntarily*. I am not in favor of adults *putting* children in time-out.)

Putting a child in time-out can also cause other difficulties. If you have ever been in a classroom, you know the typical response from a child who doesn't want to be moved: going as limp as a wet noodle and making himself impossible to hold or move. As a consultant, I learned that children often get hurt when they are forced to move but are not ready to. Furthermore, a child who does not want to be moved may resist by escalating his challenging behavior, potentially resulting in other children or even teachers getting hurt.



*As a professional who works with all ages, I find it interesting how we expect teenagers, for example, to **come to** adults when they have challenges, but we teach preschoolers to **go away** from adults when they have challenges.*



HOPING THE CHILD OUTGROWS THE BEHAVIOR

When faced with challenging behaviors, especially if early attempts to resolve them don't work, some adults throw up their hands. Family members often protest when their children are punished for challenging behaviors: "Seriously? My kid is only four! Boys will be boys, you know." Or they might insist, "He's only a kid. He'll grow out of it eventually."

THIS CHILD IS DRIVING ME *NUTS!*

Challenging behaviors can turn the classroom upside down and leave you feeling overwhelmed and defeated. **But don't give up!**

Resource books often provide tips and tricks for managing challenging behaviors, but what happens when those tactics don't work? Most teachers give up. *Push Past It!* brings a raw, real, and at times funny approach to handling challenging behaviors and understanding why most behavior-management strategies don't work.

Author Angela Searcy shares real-world examples, proven solutions, and new approaches to overcoming classroom disruptions using her PUSH PAST It approach. Beyond behavioral-management strategies, *Push Past It!* will teach you how to:

- See children's behavior as communication
- Understand what is (and is not) developmentally appropriate behavior
- Identify when to seek support
- Communicate and listen more effectively
- Help children overcome their own challenging behaviors
- Take care of yourself, too!

Don't let disruptive behavior derail your classroom or your sanity. Learn strategies that work in real life for real teachers.



Angela Searcy, EdD, has more than 25 years of experience in education, providing services to children and families as a teacher, child-development specialist, and independent consultant. A former neurodevelopmental specialist, she is the owner and founder of Simple Solutions Educational Services, a professional-development company. She is a trainer, a speaker, and a

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