

# A Practical Guide to Solving Preschool Behavior Problems



Eva Essa

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# Preface

Increasingly more children under five years of age spend part of their day away from home in a day care, preschool, or Head Start setting. Therefore, adults other than those in the immediate family influence the young child's development and personality. The preschool teacher must pay particular attention to this serious responsibility. Preschool teachers and others who interact with young children must acquire and use a variety of skills, among them the ability to guide children's day-to-day behavior.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SOLVING PRESCHOOL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS is carefully designed to help the reader develop guidance techniques. The text presents a workable method, developed through extensive research, for dealing effectively with children's behavior. The behavior modification approach is a departure from traditional methods which often fail to resolve problem situations. Many teachers use behavior modification at times, regardless of their theoretical preference. This book describes how to apply behavior modification techniques and explains the appropriate situations in which to use them.

The text is set up in a practical format; step-by-step instructions are provided to help the teacher handle specific preschool behaviors. Many texts present theory and leave you on your own to apply it. Here, the process is reversed. You are given the specifics of behavior modification techniques in particular situations; as you apply the techniques, you begin to absorb the theory behind them.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SOLVING PRESCHOOL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS considers the causes of various kinds of behavior. Before deciding to change a child's inappropriate behavior, the teacher must carefully examine the child's environment to discern which factors might provoke the behavior. For example, it is essential to learn as much as possible about the child's home life and about any medical factors which may affect behavior. An explicit part of behavior modification is a change of behavior. This book will aid you in acquiring a clear sense of when and how to apply behavior modification techniques to change behavior.

The actual completion of A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SOLVING PRESCHOOL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS would not have been possible without

help from many sources. First, I must express appreciation for the time I received to write this book during a sabbatical leave granted by the University of Nevada at Reno in the Fall of 1979. I wish to thank the many friends and colleagues whose critiques, advice, and encouragement were invaluable, particularly Dr. Robert F. Peterson, Hazel Hardy, and Sally Kees of the University of Nevada at Reno, Cynthia Richardson, and Penny Royce.

I particularly appreciate the help I received from members of my family, such as my son, Eugene, who took a number of the photographs for this book. But most of all, I owe thanks to my husband, Dr. Ahmed Essa, for his never-failing support and hours of help. The completion of this book is in great part a result of his incisive editing and his skillful photography.

Eva L. Essa

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# Overview

There is a wide range of behaviors within every class of preschool children. Children, as individuals, develop unique ways of responding to what goes on around them. Most of these behaviors are appropriate and develop further when adults or peers show approval. Some behaviors are inappropriate; this text provides practical guidelines for effecting desired changes. A class may include a youngster who hits, another who disrupts the class, one who has difficulty interacting with other children, and one who has frequent toileting accidents. Such behaviors, though common, should be of concern. Through effective guidance techniques, these behaviors can be changed.

## **SOCIAL LEARNING**

Before applying guidance techniques, it is important to understand how social learning takes place. Behavior, appropriate or inappropriate, is learned as children react to their environment and the people in it. As children interact with peers and adults, they learn ways of responding, reacting, and behaving in social situations. They also learn how others respond and react to their social behaviors. As a result, children adopt behaviors that appear to them to meet the expectations of others.

Both adaptive and problem behaviors develop in this way. What children do is either reinforced or not reinforced by those around them. Acceptable behavior continues if it is reinforced. Similarly, problem behavior also continues if it is reinforced. Both kinds of behaviors can be extinguished if they are not reinforced. Many problem behaviors are continued because youngsters are given attention when they so behave. Many appropriate behaviors are discontinued because they are not reinforced.

Inappropriate behaviors exhibited by young children stem either from patterns that have evolved in their past, or from a lack of understanding (caused by their limited social experience) of what is expected of them. This is normal. With skill, the adult can systematically change children's unacceptable behaviors to those that are more suitable. A major way to guide behavior is to



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reinforce the actions you want continued while ignoring or withdrawing attention from those actions you want to stop.

### **Physical Environment**

The physical environment in which children function is very important. The environment itself can encourage or discourage certain behaviors. For example, a large classroom with few dividers to break up space invites running. A crowded circle for storytime invites pushing. Materials placed on high shelves require the child to be dependent on the teacher. Children's behaviors need to be continually assessed in terms of the child's environment. Often it is not the child who needs to be changed, but the physical environment.

### **Development**

Adults who work with young children should be aware of the levels of development of the children in the classroom. Each stage of development has unique characteristics, needs, and behaviors. Adults' expectations need to be in line with the abilities of each child. The room arrangement, materials, activities, and daily routine should be planned to fit the specific characteristics of the group. Misbehavior can easily occur if expectations or environment are not appropriate for the age of the child. Being familiar with child development will help the teacher plan for and react accordingly to the two-year-old who wants to play with a toy alone rather than share it, the three-year-old who can sit still for only fifteen minutes of show and tell, and the four-year-old who experiments with new words which are sometimes inappropriate.

### **Prevention**

Because young children are still learning the finer points of social behavior, the teacher must be constantly alert to potential problem situations. It is necessary to be aware of which activities, which areas in the classroom, and which children or combination of children may pose a problem. Through such awareness and vigilance, many inappropriate behaviors can be avoided by redirection or intervention.

### **Rules**

Children need to know what is expected of them. Early in the school year, ask the children to help you set up simple, commonsense rules. Most rules for preschoolers should be concerned with safety. Acts that could result in injury to oneself or others must be prevented. When rules are logical, they are easy to follow. Frequent review of the rules and explanations of the reasons behind them help prevent many inappropriate behaviors.

## **Consistency**

Successful change of unacceptable behavior depends upon consistent action. It is extremely important to carry out a plan faithfully in order to obtain desirable results. When children behave in a particular way over a period of time, it is because the reactions of people around them reinforce such behavior. To change the behavior, reinforcement must be completely omitted.

If an adult ignores problem behavior each time it occurs, but then periodically pays attention to it, the child becomes confused. Inconsistent reactions will be disconcerting, and the youngster may seek the old, expected reactions by increasing the behavior.

## **Child's Concept of a Behavior**

Usually children know they are "doing wrong" when they behave in unacceptable ways. However, there are times when children behave inappropriately because they are not aware that their actions are unacceptable. It is important that the adult make the distinction known to the child. If children understand that what they are doing is unacceptable but continue anyway, the adult must systematically work on changing the behavior. If children are unaware of the inappropriateness of their actions, sometimes a simple verbal explanation will suffice. In other circumstances, the expected behavior must be taught step by step.

## **Frequency of the Behavior**

Another factor to consider is how often a behavior occurs. The techniques described in this book are intended for use with behaviors repeated consistently. A child may behave inappropriately at isolated times because of unusual circumstances. For example, the child may be tired, a stressful situation may exist at home, or the child may be provoked by a classmate. In such cases, the child should be quietly told that such behavior is not acceptable. At the same time, the cause can be explained. If possible, the situation should be remedied such as by having the tired child lie down in a quiet area. Not all problems can be remedied, but the child can know that the adult is sympathetic. If the same inappropriate behavior is repeated regularly over a period of time, something in the environment may be reinforcing the behavior. Examine the situation more closely and take systematic steps to remedy it.

## **The Teacher**

The teacher's role in dealing with children's behaviors is a vital one. The ability to be thoughtful in assessing children's actions, to understand the

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factors affecting behavior, and to be consistent in implementing plans for changing behavior are very important. Much is expected of the teacher, who must maintain objectivity and control of emotions. A teacher must be able to see a misbehaving child as a child engaging in inappropriate behavior rather than as a “bad” child. An ability to maintain mastery of the behavioral situations encountered is essential.

### **Home-School Communications**

There are practical needs for parent-teacher interaction. Whenever inappropriate behavior concerns the teacher, it is important to talk it over with the child's parents. Such communication should be honest, but not threatening. The parents may have a similar concern about the behavior. Working on the problem together, parents and teachers may find a combined home-school effort to be effective. It is also possible that the parents feel differently about the child's behavior than does the teacher. In this case, it is important to clarify the underlying values and come to an understanding.

### **The Setting**

The setting in which children are cared for must meet certain minimum requirements. The facility must be child oriented, that is, designed and furnished with children in mind. Careful attention must be given to health and safety factors, and the atmosphere must be conducive to growth and learning. There must be ample materials that are in good condition and appropriate for the ages of the children.

## **HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

This book is intended to help preschool teachers deal effectively with behaviors that occur in most early childhood settings. If a teacher decides to work on changing a particular behavior that is considered inappropriate, the behavior that most closely fits the situation should be located in the Table of Contents. Some of the most common behavioral situations that occur in early childhood settings are covered in the text. The discussion of each specific behavior is dealt with in a self-contained manner. To work on a particular behavior, study the chapter that is most closely related to the behavior.

All chapters are presented in a standardized format. The following material identifies and explains the sections of each chapter, and discusses how to use the information.

## **State the Behavior**

This section identifies the specific behavior.

## **Observe the Behavior**

Before an attempt is made to deal with inappropriate behavior, all available information about the behavior should be gathered. This section suggests some possible clues as to when, where, how, or why the behavior occurs. Some, but not all, of the suggestions will be relevant to the particular situation. Therefore, to carry out the intent of this section, all teachers in the classroom should carefully watch the child for a few days. Conscious observation often yields some invaluable information and provides the basis for more exact handling of the behavior.

It should be added that not all the suggestions made in this section are related to the outlined program of how to change the behavior. They are presented to help you examine as many aspects of the behavior as is possible.

## **Explore the Consequences**

This section explores what can happen if a problem behavior is not altered. Teachers sometimes react in self-defeating ways when dealing with unacceptable behavior. This may tend to strengthen the problem behavior, establishing a vicious cycle in which efforts to change the behavior only reinforce it.

## **Consider Alternatives**

An important consideration in this book is that inappropriate behavior does not always stem directly from the child. This section examines some alternatives to changing the child's behavior in order to eliminate a problem. Often, the environment encourages a certain behavior. For example, rearranging furniture in a crowded area may eliminate a child's tendency to hit others when in the area. This section should be given careful consideration, after making the initial observation. By no means should you begin to plan behavior change until all other possible alternatives are examined.

## **State the Goal**

The goal for the child whose behavior you want to change is stated in this section. The goal is a suggestion, and may vary according to the child, the setting, the teachers, and the parents' expectations. For one child it may be desirable to completely eliminate a certain behavior. For another child it may be an accomplishment to simply diminish the behavior to a lower level. Have a goal in mind before starting, so that progress can be measured against it.

## Procedure

This section presents a step-by-step method for changing the specific behavior addressed in the chapter.

**Definition.** A concise definition of the behavior to be changed is presented. It is important that all adults who are involved with the child have the same concept of the behavior.

**Baseline.** Teachers are asked to keep track of the behavior on a simple graph throughout the period of behavior change. Before starting the program, however, it is important to collect baseline data. *Baseline* is simply a base with which to compare later change. It is hard to know if progress is being made unless there is initial information for comparison. Baseline data provides this. It is suggested that baseline data be collected over a three-day period. The baseline period may have to be prolonged if the three days do not provide very consistent information. The section on using graphs discussed later offers more detailed ways of gathering and recording information.

**Program.** For each program, several consecutive steps or simultaneous procedures are outlined. In some cases a procedure is presented for ignoring an undesirable behavior. A step for reinforcing another, more appropriate action may also be included. In other cases the program involves gradual changes over a period of time, with steps provided for increases in expectation with each specified time period.

In a few cases the program involves a time-out procedure. This is used primarily if the child is potentially or actually harming other children. *Time-out* is a brief period away from the activity, stimulation, and attention within the classroom. The child is asked to sit quietly, without being able to play, in a designated place. Teachers decide the location of a time-out area. It may be a chair in a quiet corner of the classroom or an area outside the room. If it is outside the room, observe safety precautions. The area should be free of hazards to the child, and an adult should be able to observe the child freely. Time-out should last only three minutes at the most. For a very young preschooler, one minute is usually sufficient. It cannot be overemphasized that time-out has to be short. The technique is most effective when used sparingly.

After the situation involving inappropriate behavior has passed, talk with the child and explain what will happen if the behavior resumes. Explain that time-out is a time for the child to think about what happened.

If the child does not stay in the time-out area, as often happens the first few times, be persistent. Return the child to the area each time, and briefly

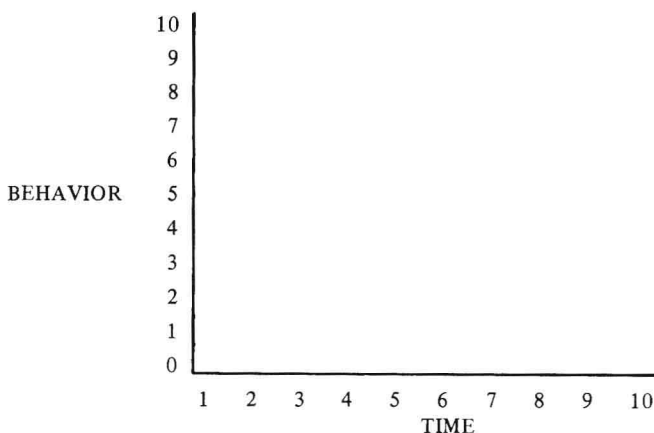
explain that the child cannot engage in classroom activity until the designated amount of time has passed. If a child refuses to remain in time-out, it might be easier to take the child to another area, such as an office. However, it is important that the child not be given undue attention. Remember that time-out is a time away from reinforcement of all kinds.

**Maintenance.** Once a goal is reached, it is important to maintain it. Suggestions are given to help you keep the appropriate behavior and avoid a setback.

## Using Graphs

At the end of each chapter is a Record Keeping Graph which can be reproduced as needed. As you complete them, these graphs provide some basic but very important information. You can see at a glance how often a behavior occurs, how consistent the behavior is, how effective your program to change the behavior is, and how well changes in your program are working.

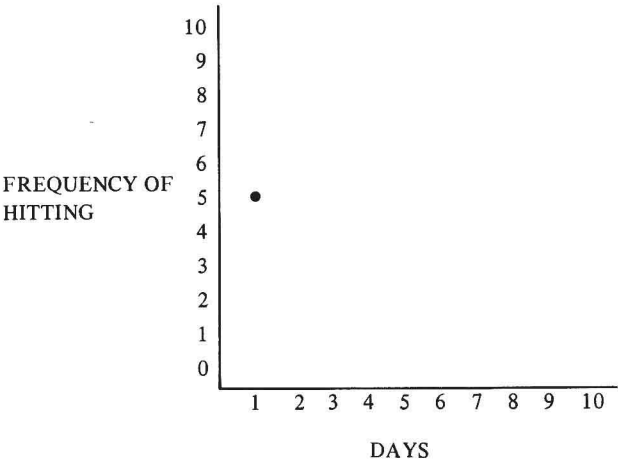
A graph has two sides, or axes. The vertical axis reflects information on how often the behavior occurs, and the horizontal axis puts the behavior within a time frame.



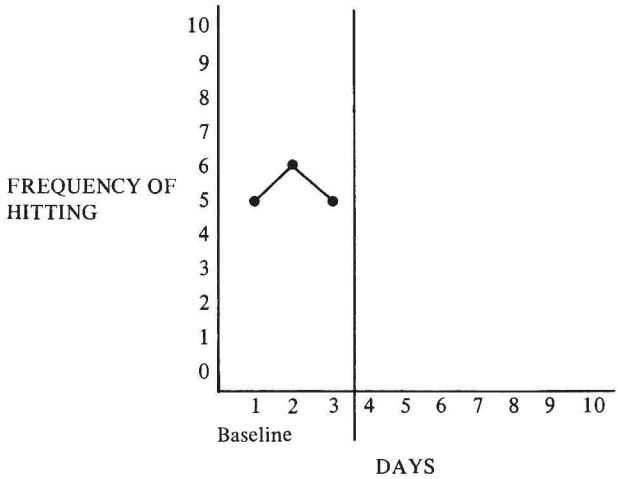
If, for instance, a child has hit other children five times, this information means little by itself. You must know if the child hit five times within a five-minute period, or within an hour, a day, a week or a year. Obviously, each of

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these circumstances conveys something different. If the child hits five times in one day, record this data on the graph in the following manner:



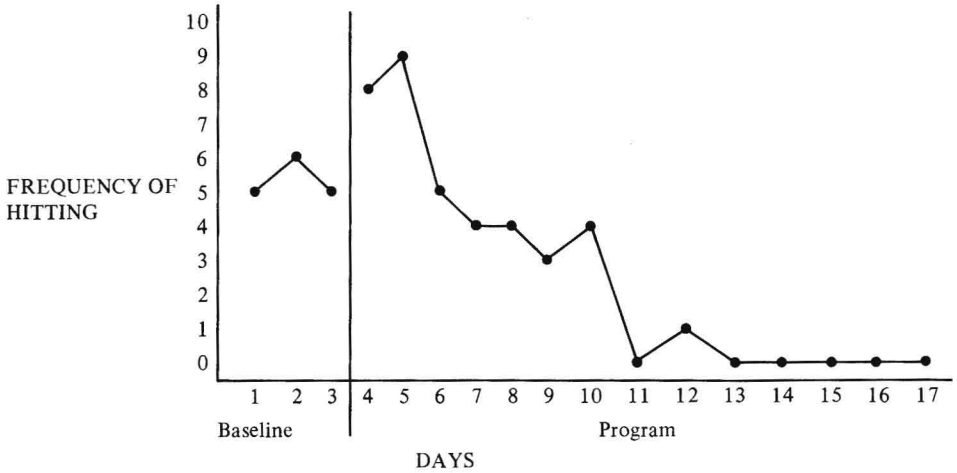
This graph is expanded as you collect baseline information. If on Day 1 you count five hits, on Day 2 you count six, and on Day 3 you count five again, your graph will look like this:



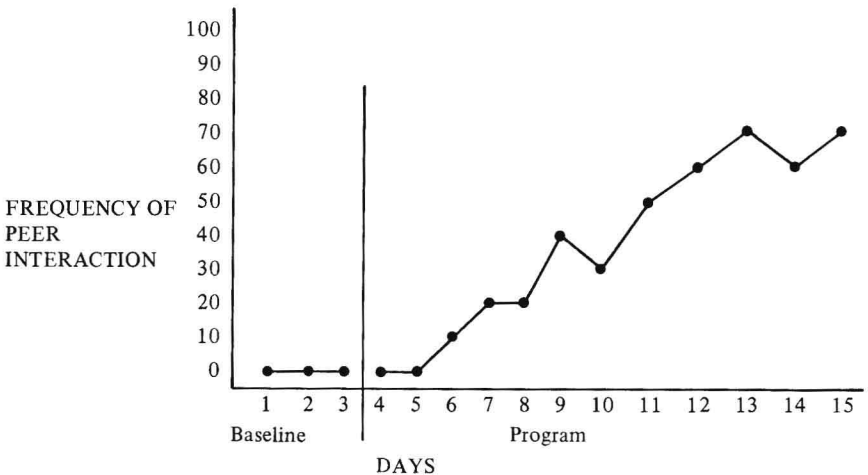
Once you begin your program, continue graphing behavior every day. In the case of the child who hits, your goal is to decrease hitting to zero times a day. Often when you change your behavior toward the child, the child tries harder for a while to regain the old, familiar reactions. It is common for negative behaviors to increase at first. Do not give up. With persistence and consistency, the behavior will decrease. If the behavior does not begin to decrease after three or four days, you need to reassess the situation and make changes in

your program. Most likely, the undesirable behavior is still being reinforced in some way, and such reinforcement must be removed before you will experience success.

The graph will indicate whether you are succeeding with the program. The following graph reflects a successful program for decreasing hitting. It shows that by Day 16 the program is successful. Measures to maintain the new behavior should now be undertaken.



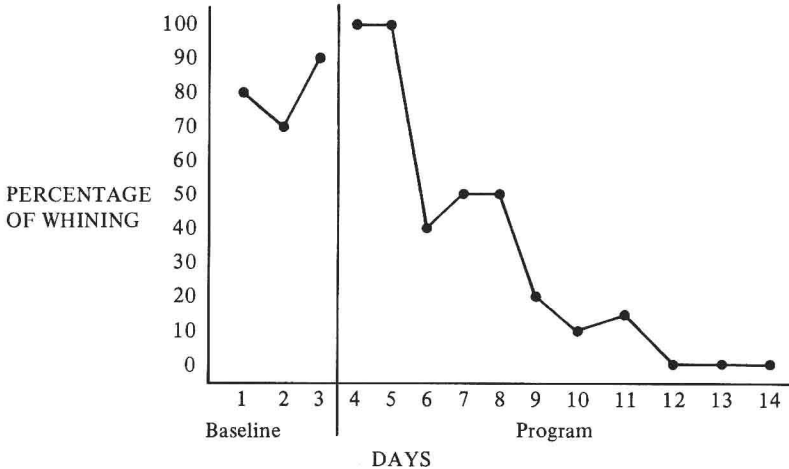
Not all programs focus on decreasing behavior. In some cases, the goal may be to increase a behavior – for example, to increase peer interaction, dramatic play, or large-muscle activity.





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The previous examples show information gathering based on frequency data. *Frequency data* is a tally of how often the behavior occurs in the designated time period. Other ways of collecting information are suggested where appropriate. In some cases, such as whining, it is relevant to know what proportion of the time the child communicates by whining. The behavior is recorded as a percentage rather than as a frequency, as shown in the following graph:



In other instances, the duration or length of the behavior is important. For example, this factor is relevant in a program intended to increase attention span:

