W. George Scarlett
and Associates

Trouble IN THE Classroom

Managing the Behavior Problems of Young Children

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Foreword

No aspect of teaching young children is more challenging than handling behavior problems in the classroom. This is particularly true for teachers who are committed to developmental education and who recognize that the optimal handling of behavior is not simply a matter of applying a set of procedures to harness and control children but rather a delicate process of considering the unique needs of individuals as they struggle to develop a positive sense of self in a complex and confounding world. In this insightful and sensitive book, W. George Scarlett and his colleagues make explicit the developmental approach, vividly revealing the essentials of what is involved. As a clinician and developmental psychologist, Scarlett is unusual; he looks at children within the classroom context, with consideration of the learning process and a deep appreciation for teachers, including their own particular styles and temperaments. He is an astute observer of human behavior and delights in unraveling the complexities of social interaction between children and their teachers. Unlike clinicians who view the child in isolation, Scarlett is not indifferent to the power of the classroom as a force that influences behavior strategically.

Of particular significance is the way in which Scarlett goes beyond the basics of handling a particular episode or set of problems that might occur and considers other matters not always

immediately associated with difficult behavior. For example, he explores the critical importance of play, specifically, fantasy and dramatic play, and reveals the way in which teachers can be influential in how they model and facilitate play for children who lack initiative and a secure sense of self. Scarlett and the other contributors to this volume help us to understand more fully that a broad array of factors influence behavior, such as the arrangement of the physical environment, the dynamics of friendship, the quality of attachment to significant adults, and the curriculum and how it relates to the struggles of an individual child. Even the way in which classroom teachers and specialists deal with one another on matters of mutual concern is considered.

One issue that is addressed directly is the way in which teachers who are committed to a developmental approach sometimes use methods that seem didactic and behavioristic. These methods are often viewed as contradictory. The contributors to this book make clear that the term *developmental* is complex and multidimensional, and that the needs of individual children require teachers to have a full range of techniques at their command. Issues of culture, temperament, and early socialization are all crucial factors that influence a teacher's decision making about how to proceed in a given situation.

In sum, although this small book deals with complicated issues related to applied child development, it does so in a direct, concise, and forthright manner, free of educational jargon. The material is rich, with vivid illustrations gathered from classrooms, making teacher-child, child-child, and even teacher-teacher interactions readily understandable to a wide range of readers.

August 1997

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Preface

When I began working as a consultant to early childhood programs in the 1970s, my first assignment was at a day-care center in a housing project. The teachers there had asked the local mental health agency for someone to help them with a problem. The problem was sex. Little boys and girls were doing things that seemed to involve more than the usual innocent explorations of childhood.

Since this was my first consulting assignment, I was naturally a little nervous. I was nervous also because I had no idea of what to suggest—even though I understood that no one can know beforehand what to suggest. And I am sure I was nervous because the topic was sex.

So, I arrived at the center nervous and a minute or two early as teachers herded children into the next room for naps. I took a seat and waited, something that bothered me since I was used to keeping to a set appointment time and holding to a schedule. But I was bothered even more when, at last, the teachers became free to sit with me but did not, when they nodded a friendly hello, paused to get themselves coffee, and (most bothersome to me) just chatted among themselves. The waiting, coupled with my nervousness and my having to sit on the tiniest of chairs, made me feel more like becoming a behavior problem than solving one.

Given my state, I was surprised that once the meeting began, it went so well. At first, the teachers and I seemed a perfect mismatch, and the classroom's problems seemed overwhelming. The problems included disorder stemming not so much from the character of the children as from the absence of a strong curriculum and a wise approach to classroom management. Furthermore, the teachers were not always responsible. For example, half way through my first year of consulting, one teacher took off with the others' paychecks.

But, eventually, it was clear that we were a match. For two years, consulting on an almost weekly basis, I taught the teachers how to address behavior problems indirectly by supporting the development of children's inner resources and by supporting the children's struggles to master developmental tasks—an approach that I would later characterize as "letting development be a cure for behavior problems." In return, they taught me how a classroom for young children can do well when it becomes a community.

This classroom was indeed a community, which more than made up for its problems. The children, though unruly at times, always seemed happy and secure in their connections to teachers and classmates. The parents, like small-town neighbors, stopped by for support and gossip. And the prodigal teacher, with what she described as "borrowed" paychecks, returned to an almost biblical welcome and the resumption of her job. I learned to not judge too quickly, and I learned that the business of caring for children actually is not business, but simply caring.

Years later, this theme of community came up in conversations between myself and a master teacher. I had been asking her to share her thoughts with me on how curricula can help children with behavior problems. I had assumed she would talk to me about materials, lessons, and projects—ways of engaging children's interests and helping them to play and work constructively. Thinking metaphorically, I reasoned that if the devil makes use of idle hands, then angels must hover about the busy. However, this teacher responded to my questions by talking to me about building a com-

munity and about ensuring that every child feels that he or she has a place in the classroom community. For her, building a community *is* the curriculum and a powerful cure for behavior problems. I agree.

This book is, in many ways, an outgrowth of those conversations and the firsthand experiences of myself and others in the classroom. Our major aim is to describe and illustrate ways to deal with behavior problems by supporting children's development and building communities in classrooms.

But these two goals present two dilemmas: first, a dilemma between meeting short-term needs for order and long-term needs for development and, second, a dilemma between meeting the needs of individual children and meeting the needs of groups of children. These dilemmas occur because what is good for maintaining order is not always good for children's development (and vice versa) and what is good for individuals is not always good for groups (and vice versa). So, a second aim of this book is to show how to manage these dilemmas.

A third aim is to define core beliefs about managing behavior problems in ways that promote children's self-control. A book on behavior problems should define a useful set of tactics for managing expectable problem behaviors, but it should do more by defining good core beliefs that provide a wellspring for generating new tactics to manage even the unexpected.

In this book, the main core belief is that behavior management for the purpose of promoting children's self-control works best when children and teachers have formed *partnerships* and when teachers have worked to *share control*. This core belief is illustrated daily by developmental educators. Over the past twenty-five years, I have sat in classrooms listening to and watching master teachers at work. I have come to the conclusion that trained, experienced early childhood educators are our nation's true experts on children's behavior problems. While others may raise their voices in anger or devise clever systems to control children, these teachers listen patiently, challenge and guide gently, and, over time, help children outgrow

their behavior problems. And they succeed not so much because they have tactics for managing problem behaviors but because they adhere to this core belief about partnerships and sharing control.

In my experience, the clearest examples of the differences between these master teachers developing partnerships with children and sharing control and the majority of not-so-masterful adults controlling children emerge at group meetings in the classroom. I remember the first time I witnessed a master teacher in a kindergarten classroom when a group meeting had fallen apart. My reflex assumption was that the teacher would raise her voice, give directives, and try to physically control a child or two. But, instead, she sat back calmly and said, "We've fallen apart. What are we going to do?"

In response to the teacher's question, one child suggested she send them all to time-out. Another said the school should hire extra teachers to see to it that the children behaved. Still others gave their points of view. The teacher listened to each child's suggestion and provided respectful feedback. Gradually, she shaped the discussion so that everyone was talking not about how some outside force could control them better but how the children in partnership with the teacher could generate good rules and routines to help them control themselves. It was a wonderful performance. Such performances are not rare. They go on all the time in good classrooms for young children, and they illustrate what I mean by a core belief for thinking about behavior problems. This book, then, attempts to explain what master teachers are already doing in their classrooms.

It also attempts to show the power of a developmental approach for helping even very diverse groups of children, children from minority cultures and children with special needs. Many teachers are rightfully concerned that children who are different from the norm often end up receiving less support because their differences are misunderstood or because others focus solely on their deficiencies. These children are sometimes unnecessarily weeded out from the larger community and subjected to environments designed mostly to control them. But these children, though different, have

the same basic needs as all children for support and a sense of community. In meeting their basic needs, we may have to do things differently, but we do not have to abandon a developmental approach, as this book is designed to demonstrate.

Over twelve years ago, when I began writing this book, I fully intended to write all of its chapters. But when I began, I was not as aware as I am now of how complex the task is to transform classrooms into caring and productive communities. Happily, I found others who are more knowledgeable than me about developing classrooms. So, later chapters are written mostly by others—master teachers with wonderful stories to tell. They speak in their own voices, but each voice expresses the book's developmental approach and point of view.

This strategy of approaching behavior problems as a matter of supporting the development of children's inner resources and supporting children as they struggle to master developmental tasks, developing classrooms into caring and productive communities, managing dilemmas, and acquiring core beliefs may frustrate our normal desire for simple and clear-cut solutions, approaches that attack behavior problems head-on, and that go directly to the business of managing or eliminating those problems. But if supporting children's overall development is our primary aim, we must somehow tolerate this frustration. Classrooms are complex and messy, so our approach to behavior problems should never be too simple or too clean. A developmental approach to behavior problems is neither: it addresses the complexity and the messiness of classrooms. This book is an attempt to show how.

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LAWRENCE KOHLBERG, until his death in 1987, was professor of education and director of the Center for Moral Development and Moral Education at Harvard University. He presented his theory and research on moral stage development and its implications for education in more than a hundred articles and book chapters as well as in several books, including *The Philosophy of Moral Development*, *The Psychology of Moral Development*, *The Measurement of Moral Judgment*, *Programs of Early Education*, and *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*.

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Part One

Introduction

Development [is] the aim of education.
Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972)

In Part One, we provide an overview of a developmental approach to behavior problems. The key elements of this approach are supporting the development of children's inner resources and their struggles to master developmental tasks, developing classrooms into caring and productive communities, and accommodating diversity.

The original quote from Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) read "Development *as* the aim of education."