

Working With a Challenging Child

By Michelle Graves, Educational Director, Allen Creek Preschool,
Ann Arbor, Michigan, and High/Scope Trainer

The High/Scope Curriculum recommends a preventive approach to child behavior problems in which team members work to avert difficulties and conflicts by creating a supportive classroom environment and an orderly daily routine. When prevention fails, we advise adults to help children resolve their own conflicts and frustrations through problem solving rather than through adult-imposed control or punishment. The goal of this approach is to help children become aware of how their own actions affect others and of how the choices they make can help them overcome difficulties and conflicts.

While this approach enables most children to function fairly smoothly in most early childhood settings, sometimes staff find themselves spending a disproportionate amount of time dealing with the problems created by one or two challenging children. When faced with one child's severe behavior problems, they often ask themselves whether they, as program staff, are the "real problem." They may first try to lessen the child's troublesome behavior by altering the environment, but when such efforts fail repeatedly, they may wonder whether the child needs an entirely different approach.

Each challenging child is a different individual, and we don't claim to have answers for every child; however, we have dealt successfully with such problems in the High/Scope Demonstration Preschool. Following is a description of one such



A teacher gently holds an upset child, helping him to regain control before attempting to talk over the problem. Photo by Patricia Evans

difficult situation we experienced and the process the staff went through in coping with it.

Jeremy (the name is fictitious) was 3½ years old when he entered our program. We soon noticed that when Jeremy could not have exactly what he wanted, he would react violently: biting, kicking, screaming curses, throwing things, and occasionally making a "mad dash" out of our classroom space. These outbursts, which occurred once or twice each morning, were so severe and disruptive that it often took 10–45 minutes of a staff member's time to calm Jeremy down.

During the next few months of school, much of our time together as a team was spent in discussions about Jeremy. Here are some of the



Six Steps in Conflict Resolution

Children with challenging behavior can learn the following six-step process to resolve conflicts with other children, but you will need to use the steps below with extra patience and persistence. Note that each step is also a general interaction strategy that can be used in many situations to encourage positive behavior.

1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions.
2. Acknowledge children's feelings.
3. Gather information.
4. Restate the problem.
5. Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together.
6. Be prepared to give follow-up support. □

strategies we developed for working with him.

✓ **We took turns being the adult who stopped the behaviors** when they occurred—spreading this difficult task around helped us be more patient with Jeremy. Even though we wanted Jeremy to develop inner controls, it was usually necessary at first to **physically supply the control that Jeremy lacked**. For example, we would separate Jeremy from the person being bitten or the object being thrown, and we would hold him inside the classroom when he tried to run out. As we held Jeremy, we would calmly and patiently explain why we could not let him do what he was doing, labeling the feelings that we thought were causing the behavior. In restraining Jeremy, we tried to avoid sending mixed messages. For example, if the adult spoke in a calm voice but her body was tense as she held him, Jeremy might not feel that we were confident that he would learn to control his own behavior.

✓ **We made an effort to spend time with Jeremy during his calmer moments, playing next** to him or describing his behavior and the positive reactions he was getting from other children: “When you built together with Sally today, the house you made was big enough to fit three people inside.”

✓ **We recorded our observations of Jeremy**. We kept track of the frequency of his outbursts and looked for patterns: Did the problems tend to occur at certain times of the day? Were they

related to changes in the classroom routine? Much later in the year, with the help of his family, we kept track of how much he was sleeping and what kinds of foods he was eating.

✓ **We used the daily routine as a vehicle for helping Jeremy control his behavior**. If Jeremy refused to do something that the group was doing (such as clean up after work time) we could remind him of the many choices that would be possible at other parts of the routine. “It’s time to for you to clean up and get your jacket on, but when we get outside, you can decide what you want to play with there.” When Jeremy understood the schedule better, he was sometimes able to cope more appropriately with frustration.

✓ **We tried to help the other children understand their own feelings about Jeremy in the classroom and the ways they could deal with his unpredictable behaviors**: “I know it scares you when Jeremy comes close to you. Tell him: ‘It hurts me when you try to bite. Stop it.’”

✓ **We looked for ways for Jeremy to take responsibility for his behavior**. For example, when he pulled the arms out of a doll, we helped him find a way to repair it before he chose another activity.

✓ **We involved Jeremy’s parents in the process of finding ways to deal with him**. This was perhaps the most difficult part of dealing with this situation. We tried to balance our reports on Jeremy’s challenging behavior with some

positive comments. It took several meetings and phone calls before the parents realized that we were not passing judgment on them. Once they trusted us, they were able to provide us with a great deal of support, both by continuing our classroom behavior strategies with Jeremy at home and by telling us about outside stresses that might be affecting Jeremy’s behavior in preschool.

✓ **As a team, we talked about and set time limits** (for example, “We’ll try this for three weeks. If we don’t see any improvement, we will...”). Knowing that we wouldn’t have to endure the situation indefinitely helped us over the rough spots with Jeremy. We anticipated that we might have to repeat our behavior strategies many more times with Jeremy than we have to with most children before we would see results. However, we didn’t want to spend so much time and effort on Jeremy that the rest of the class suffered or that staff members got burned out.

✓ **When we felt stretched (by about week three) we looked to community resources for support**. We contacted a local Foster Grandparent Program and accepted volunteer workers in our classroom. They helped with the other children so staff members could spend more time working directly with Jeremy. We also asked a social worker from the local social services department to observe in the classroom. She gave us

some much-needed encouragement by confirming that we were on the right track with Jeremy.

As it turned out, our patience and persistence with Jeremy were eventually rewarded. Slowly, Jeremy's development progressed; as he grew older, the techniques we were modeling gradually became a part of him instead of something that came from us. He hit others less often, used language more often to describe his anger, and he stopped running out of the classroom.

Reflecting on this experience, we realize that we used the same basic strategies with Jeremy that we use with most children, but we used them with more intensity, frequency, and patience. We're glad that we did not "throw in the towel" too early and we believe that the patience we displayed helped Jeremy find control within himself. We realize, however, that such efforts are not always successful. If we had felt that all involved were losing too much by continuing in the situation, our next step would have been to help Jeremy's parents find a more appropriate placement for him.

For more information on preventing behavior problems and helping children resolve conflicts see *You Can't Come to My Birthday Party: Conflict Resolution With Young Children*, by Betsy Evans, and two videos produced by Betsy Evans: *Supporting Young Children in Resolving Conflicts* (pre-school level) and *It's Mine: Responding to Problems and Conflicts* (infant-toddler level), all available from High/Scope Press (Orders: 1-800-40-PRESS; Online Store: www.highscope.org)

Summary of Teaching Strategies for Challenging Behavior

- Take turns with other team members in dealing with child's challenging behavior.
- When the child's behavior gets out of control, stop the inappropriate behavior, physically supplying the control the child lacks; hold the child while calmly explaining the reasons why the behavior is unacceptable. Describe and label the child's feelings if he or she is unable to describe them.
- Use the six steps in High/Scope conflict resolution process to help the child resolve conflict with others. If the children are very upset, remember to use the calming strategies above before attempting to problem-solve. When children are intensely emotional, you may have to acknowledge feelings many times throughout the six-step process.
- Convey your confidence that the child will learn to control his or her behavior.
- During the child's calmer moments, play and talk with him or her.
- Record observations of the child, and look for patterns in his or her behavior.
- Use the daily routine as a vehicle for helping the child control his or her behavior.
- Look for ways to encourage the child to take responsibility for his or her behavior.
- Help other children in the classroom understand and label their reactions to the child who is disruptive.
- Involve the child's parents in the team's effort to find ways to deal with the child.
- Set a time limit decide in advance for when the team will re-evaluate the situation and for how long they will endure the situation if there is no improvement.
- Look for help from outside agencies and community volunteers.