A Guide to Responding to Challenging Behaviors and Preventing Expulsion from Child Care Programs

“The primary goal of early education is to start children on their educational careers so they can succeed in elementary school and beyond. Children with severe behavioral challenges obviously need considerable support to be ready to succeed in school. Therefore, expelling the children most in need of classroom socializing opportunities runs counter to the mission of school readiness and shifts the focus of early education away from the children who need the most help.”

Walter S. Gilliam, PhD
Foundation for Child Development Policy Brief
January 2008

This guide and protocol were created with the help of a grant funded by the NYS Council on Children and Families. Development of these materials was a collaborative effort by staff from Child Care Solutions, Mid-State Early Childhood Direction Center, St. Joseph’s Hospital, PEACE, Inc., The Office of Children and Family Services, and Exceptional Family Resources.

Special thanks are due to Glenda Criss, Peggy Liuzzi, Shannon Gillen, Pat Beck, Andrea Hodkinson, Nicole Schwartz, Sue DeCarlo, Kate Kelsen, and Laura Shaw for the time and energy they committed to this project.
Take these steps when you have concerns about a child who is exhibiting challenging behaviors:

**Step 1.** Do a Self-Assessment on the classroom environment and whether staff members are experiencing stress or illnesses that might interfere with their self-care. Can you identify concerns in either area?

The self-assessment should look at environmental factors, such as daily schedules, room arrangement, rules and expectations, and toys and materials that might trigger or increase behavioral concerns. The self-assessment should also look at staff interactions and relationships with each other and the children.

There are many tools that could be used in this step, including, but not limited to:
- Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS)
- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECCERS)
- Family Childcare Environmental Rating Scale (FCCERS)
- Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT)
- Teaching Pyramid Infant Toddler Observation Scale (TPITOS)
- Mental Health Screening Form III (MHSF)
- Modified Mini Screen (MMS)

Appendix A has a copy of the TPOT, TPITOS, MHSF, and MMS. These are all available to use at no cost. The ITERS, ECCERS, and FCCERS cost approximately $25 and can be purchased online.
If there are concerns based on these scales, as a staff team, you can brainstorm ideas to improve in those areas. Program improvements often have a positive impact on children’s behaviors. If you are not sure how to make improvements or which improvements would make the most difference, you can contact an outside agency for help and support. See Appendix B for a list of community agencies.

**Step 2.** Have a conversation with the family about your concerns. Does the family share the concerns? If so, refer them to the appropriate agency for assistance. See Appendix B for a list of community agencies.

In your conversation with the family, you will want to find out: Does the child exhibit the same behaviors at home and in the program? Have there been responses that the family has found successful or unsuccessful? Through this discussion, try to come up with one or two strategies to respond to the behavior. Once you identify strategies, try them out with consistency for 2-4 weeks and then meet with the parents again. In your second meeting, you’ll want to discuss what changes you’ve seen in their child’s behavior. If there is progress, keep working with those strategies for a few more weeks and meet again.

If you were not able to agree upon strategies with the family, seek an outside agency for support. You can find a list of agencies offering this level of support in Appendix B. There are many reasons that you may not have come up with shared solutions, so don’t despair if this happens. Some common reasons are that the child does not show the same behaviors at home so parents aren’t sure how to respond. Or, the parent may make a recommendation that you cannot follow. Either way, an outside agency should be able to give both you and the family additional tools and strategies.

**Step 3.** Use the Mental Health Screening Tool to determine if there may be a need for additional services. If the screening tool suggests that a referral be made, talk with the family and provide them with information about agencies that can help and support their family. A list of mental health providers can be found at [http://ecdc.syr.edu/mental-health-resources/mental-health-directory/](http://ecdc.syr.edu/mental-health-resources/mental-health-directory/)

It is important for you and the family to understand that the tool is only a screening tool, not a diagnostic tool. If there are concerns based on the screening tool, get the parents’ permission to have an outside observation scheduled. Either way, seek an outside agency to provide another look at your program. See Appendix B for a list of outside agencies.

A child might be referred to an outside agency and that agency might report that the child is within normal limits and does not need support services or counseling. Or the child may be identified as needing counseling or additional services. If the family elects to use a mental health provider, that provider may be able to suggest ideas and strategies that you could use with the child in your program. Ask the family for a signed permission to talk with the mental health provider and/or for a copy of any reports that the provider shares with the family that might help you support their child.

**Step 4:** Implement the changes/strategies suggested either by the outside agency or service provider. If those changes are still not successful, work with Child Care Solutions and the family to find alternate child care programming for the child. This is a difficult time for both the child and his or her family. Please work with the family to make a smooth transition by giving the family at least a week’s notice, or longer if possible, so that they have time to find alternate care. Help them connect with Child Care Solutions and offer your assistance to make the transition easier.

Page 3 of 5
Updated 6/18/2013
Appendix A: Assessment Tools

In this section, we have provided a copy of the following assessment tools:

1. Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT)—used to evaluate the social emotional climate and support in a classroom. Used for classrooms where the majority of students are preschool age (2.5 years-5 years).
2. Teaching Pyramid Infant Toddler Observation Scale (TPITOS)—used to evaluate the social emotional climate and support in a classroom. Used for classrooms where the majority of students are infants or toddlers (birth-3 years old).
3. Mental Health Screening Form III—Used so staff can self-screen for depression, self-care concerns and mental health needs.
4. Modified Mini Screen—Used for staff to self-screen for depression, self-care concerns and mental health needs.
Appendix B: Community Agencies

For outside observations of your program:

Child Care Solutions: 315-446-1220
- Provides observations of child care programs and resources and supports for families looking for childcare.

Mid-State Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC): 315-443-4444
- Provides observations of child care programs to support inclusion of children with disabilities and challenging behavior. Will help parents through the process of Early Intervention or Preschool Special Education.

For an outside evaluation for special education needs:

Onondaga County Early Intervention Program: 315-435-3230
- Provides standardized assessments for children ages birth through 3 years old to determine if a child qualifies for special education services. All assessments are free of charge. Families must agree to receive the evaluation and services.

Preschool Special Education (contact ECDC for help, 315-443-4444)
- Each school district has their own preschool special education program so families or child care programs should contact ECDC to obtain contact information and receive support on making a referral. All assessments and services are provided free of charge. Families must make the referral to receive the evaluation or services.