Let us begin with a definition of challenging behaviors. The temptation is to simply list various actions such as screaming, hitting others, running away, cursing, etc. The problem with this approach is the potential list is endless; and, it would be unlikely any two people would agree on the list content. Herein lies our first and perhaps the most critical key to success.

**Key 1:** We each define challenging behaviors based upon our unique set of past experiences, values, instructional practices, and institutional guidelines.

Because we each define challenging behaviors in our unique, idiosyncratic ways, we are part and parcel of the problem! Some of us have a very low threshold, becoming upset when children are “fidgety” at circle time. Others see no cause for concern, much less for systematic intervention, in this situation. The hard truth is that the most accurate, useful definition for challenging behavior is this: Challenging behavior is any behavior that is disturbing to you and that you wish to see stopped.

By understanding our unique contribution to the definition of challenging behavior we can then move ahead to the second key to success.

**Key 2:** We each must become more “comfortable” with challenging behaviors if we are to be successful agents of change.

By “comfortable” we do not mean that one should work to like obnoxious behaviors or simply not pay attention to them. However, if we know and accept the fact that certain child behaviors are disturbing to us (by definition), we must also be willing to acknowledge the inevitable human condition of being less than our best when we are under stress: in this case, stress caused by child behaviors that can result in our being flooded with feelings of anger, frustration, embarrassment, and even hopelessness. How do we get more comfortable? The answer

Stop thinking about “removing the child” as the “real” answer to our problem.
is simple, but often difficult in practice. We suggest the following:

1. Learn to recognize those situations that are disturbing;
2. Share those feelings and situations with colleagues or other adults;
3. Develop mutual support systems among colleagues or other adults; and
4. Strive to expand your alternatives to prevent or intervene with those disturbing situations.

As we work to become more comfortable with disturbing behaviors we will know our efforts are successful when we:

1. Stop thinking about “removing the child” as the “real” answer to our problem.
2. Stop blaming disturbing behaviors on uncontrollable, extraneous events (e.g., “He just comes to school in these moods,” “If only her family cared more,” “If he doesn’t get his pill on time, this is what happens.”).
3. Start celebrating where we are now in comparison to where we were.
4. Start to become a resource to our colleagues and friends who are struggling with their own unique challenging situations.

The final step in becoming more comfortable with challenging behaviors involves altering certain ideas and expectations most of us have regarding the effectiveness of interventions to prevent or remediate challenging events.

What are these “misguided” ideas and expectations? While many of us know better at an intellectual level, we often launch our interventions with the expectations of “never ever” and “fixed for good.” These are totally understandable; no one desires to be cursed at or spat upon “just occasionally”! Yet, the expectations of “never ever” and “fixed for good” are a no win set-up for children and those striving to help. If we fail to see, acknowledge, and celebrate the success of moving from 15 spats per day to twice per week, for example, because “never ever” is the only acceptable outcome, then we become the eternal victims of our emotional response to disturbing behaviors. We may, indeed we should, work toward moving from twice per week to fewer and fewer episodes. The real challenge is to be sufficiently comfortable enough to recognize the mutual success that we and the children have achieved along the way.

Closely linked to the dangerous expectations of “never ever” and “fixed for good” is the idea or perhaps just the hope that things will get better, not worse, once we begin some systematic intervention. Regrettably, the reality is often just the opposite. A third misguided expectation is that our initial attempts at designing some intervention to prevent or remediate challenging behaviors will have a high probability of ultimate success. We think the reality is closer to 30%. Even with relatively unlimited resources and intervention planners with decades of experience, initial designs most often need to be changed. Our challenge, given this initial success ratio, is to:

1. Be humble in presenting our initial ideas to colleagues and consumers.
2. Set into place a careful system for monitoring intervention effects.
3. Meet regularly (at least every two weeks) as a team to discuss the need to modify the intervention.

As we begin to design preventive and/or remedial interventions (hopefully with a clear and accurate understanding of our own role in defining challenging behaviors and in judging their probable outcome), our next key to success is as follows:

**Key 3:** Any challenging behavior that persists over time is “working” for the child.

Key 3 highlights the importance of our understanding the causes of challenging behaviors. They do not just spontaneously erupt (although it may feel that way). They are not simply a behavioral characteristic of certain groups of children. Nor are they accurately
viewed as some out-of-control, bizarre, nonfunctional child behaviors. Rather, we have come to understand that most of these challenging behaviors have a purposeful, communicative function. However, effective or ineffective, these behaviors represent the child’s attempts to communicate a variety of different messages, including:

1. You’re asking me to do something that is too difficult.
2. I don’t understand what you want.
3. I want a certain thing, and I want it now.
4. I’m bored, pay some attention to me.

Knowing that challenging behaviors are designed in most cases to express some desire or preference changes the intervention equation 180°. It is no longer legitimate or professionally acceptable to simply work toward making children stop doing a certain behavior; instead, we need to focus on teaching the child new, easy, and more socially acceptable ways to communicate.

Our fourth key to success builds directly on the third. Let us examine more closely the example communications mentioned above. They each communicate a desire or want that could, potentially, have been anticipated and in so doing, the challenging behavior could have been prevented. For example, providing activities closer to the child’s developmental capability, being more concrete in making a request (e.g., showing a picture along with asking), using highly desirable toys and materials to teach many different skills, and providing a rich array of positive feedback to children could, in order, well be the precise preventive intervention needed to address each of the aforementioned “communications.” Herein lies of fourth key.

**Key 4:** When prevention becomes the goal, as it should, the focus of intervention planning changes from what we might do to the child to what we might change about our own classroom practices.

Evaluating and changing classroom practices as a strategy for dealing with challenging behaviors has the benefit of not only addressing the behavior of the child or children in question but also reducing the likelihood that other children will exhibit challenging behaviors. While changes in the following practices may not reduce or prevent all challenging behaviors, these changes are easier to implement than more systematic behavior change programs.

In the following section we will describe four categories of preventative practices that should be evaluated: (1) physical environment; (2) activities and materials; (3) scheduling; and (4) strategies for promoting appropriate behaviors. The focus of this discussion is on changes to the classroom or home environment for the purpose of increasing children’s appropriate engagement while preventing or decreasing the likelihood of challenging behaviors.

### Physical Environment

There are several factors related to the physical environment that can affect children’s behavior. These things may be easier to change than any of the other practices discussed in this article. First, the arrangement of learning centers should be considered. Centers that have minimal space, or centers that are associated with different activity levels and/or noise levels (e.g., blocks and listening centers) and are in close proximity to one another may result in conflicts between children as well as other behaviors that may be considered by teachers to be problematic (e.g., disturbing your neighbor).

Second, traffic patterns in classrooms are often problematic. Classrooms arranged such that there are wide open spaces in the middle of the room may serve the function of encouraging children to run from one activity to another. Classrooms that are overly crowded with minimal room for moving from one center to another may result in behaviors such as bumping into one another, knocking things off of shelves, or knock-
ing chairs over. In order to prevent these types of problems, the following things should be considered:

- Are there boundaries between centers that delineate the centers but which are open enough to provide adequate space for multiple children to be in each center at the same time?
- Are centers arranged such that noisy centers (e.g., blocks, dramatic play) are located some distance from quieter centers (e.g., listening, books)?
- Are centers located in close proximity to the materials and equipment needed for each center? For example, is the art area located near a sink?
- Are the centers arranged such that there is adequate space to allow for easy movement between centers (including movement of wheelchairs) while ensuring there are not wide open spaces in which children are likely to run?

**Activities and Materials**

One key to preventing challenging behaviors is ensuring children are actively and appropriately engaged in activities with materials or people. Engagement refers to the amount of time children spend interacting appropriately with their environment (McWilliam, 1991). When children are engaged with people or materials, they are less likely to exhibit challenging behaviors. There are several things we can do to support children's engagement with their environment. First, and perhaps most important, we must provide children with interesting materials and activities. While this may seem obvious in theory, it is not always as easy in practice. Given that children have different interests, there must be a variety of materials and activities from which children can choose. In addition, there must be an adequate number of materials in order to reduce the likelihood that children will argue over materials.

Second, we must ensure there are materials appropriate to the developmental levels of all children in the classroom. Activities or materials that are too difficult or not challenging enough may cause children to be frustrated, and frustration often leads to behaviors that many would consider challenging.

Third, even when we provide a variety of materials in terms of both type and difficulty level, we cannot assume all children will engage with those materials or activities independently. Some children (e.g., those with more severe disabilities) will need support from adults and/or peers in terms of choosing an activity as well as participating in the activity once they have selected it. Other children may need ongoing positive feedback from adults and/or peers in order to maintain their engagement with a material or activity and to prevent them from wandering around the room during free choice time.

**Scheduling**

A classroom schedule that is well-designed and is implemented consistently may be the single most important factor in preventing challenging behaviors. There are two key issues which should be considered related to scheduling. First, routines are critical to supporting young children's appropriate behaviors. There should be a routine schedule that is followed on a daily basis, and the children must be aware of that schedule. Schedules that change from day to day and week to week prevent children from learning routines. When children know what to do and when to do it, they are less likely to exhibit behaviors that might be viewed as challenging. Of course, routine does not imply sameness, merely predictability regarding the type of activity that comes next.

The second issue related to scheduling has to do with transitions. Too many transitions, too little structure during transitions, transitions that are too long, or transitions that occur without any warning set the stage for challenging behaviors. One of the problems with transitions is they are often characterized by children waiting for extended periods of time with nothing to do while they are waiting. Challenging behaviors are likely to occur when children have nothing to do (i.e., when they are not engaged). Consider the following suggestions for structuring...
transitions to reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors:

- Minimize the number of daily transitions, especially those that require children to move between activities as a large group. Large group transitions are likely to result in waiting time for some children. Allowing children to move to a new activity as they complete a prior one will ensure that children do not spend time waiting on others to complete the activity.

- When possible, structure transitions such that one adult reads a story, sings songs, or does some other activity for those children who complete the transition most quickly, while another adult assists the other children in making the transition. This will provide the children who transition quickly with something to do while they are waiting and if the activity is interesting, it may reduce the time it takes other children to transition.

- Provide children with a warning shortly before a transition is going to take place. This gives children an opportunity to finish what they are doing prior to having to put it away. This warning can be made by ringing a bell, blinking the lights, singing a clean-up song, or providing a verbal instruction to the children. Remember that different children may need different types of warnings (e.g., verbal, auditory, pictures) either because of sensory impairments or other learning characteristics.

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**Promoting Appropriate Behaviors**

As teachers, we often assume children will learn appropriate social skills naturally through interactions with children and adults. Rather than focusing on teaching appropriate social behaviors, we focus on what to do when children “misbehave.” We would like to suggest that preventing challenging behaviors depends upon the extent to which we teach appropriate behaviors. For example, we should not expect children to follow the rules if they have not been provided with instructions to do so. We might assume that kindergarten age children know about the importance of sharing. However, children who are in school for the first time may have had limited experiences with sharing their toys. It is not fair to discipline them for not sharing when they have not been taught about the importance of sharing.

So, what can we do to teach appropriate behaviors to children? First, we should establish a few important class rules and ensure all the children understand the rules. One way to increase the likelihood that children will understand the rules is to include them in making the rules. Once the rules are established, they can be posted in the room using signs that have both words and pictures. In order for children to understand and follow the rules, it will be important to discuss the rules on a regular basis and to talk about why the rules are important. In addition, children will need to see that the rules have consistent consequences.

Second, as adults, we should model appropriate social behaviors in the classroom. If we expect children not to yell when they are mad, we should model appropriate ways of expressing our anger. We should not expect children not to yell when they have observed the teacher yelling. Strategies for modeling appropriate social behaviors should be planned and implemented as appropriate opportunities arise.

Third, we can teach appropriate social behaviors by commenting on children who are exhibiting appropriate behaviors (e.g., “Jesse, thank you for helping Sarah put up her toys”), role-playing examples of appropriate social behaviors (e.g., role-playing what children might do if someone takes something away from them), and talking about social behaviors during group times (e.g., “I saw some people sharing their toys during center time. Can anyone tell me about someone they saw today who was sharing?”). By teaching appropriate social behaviors, we provide children with options for how they might respond to problematic situations. As we discussed earlier, children often exhibit challenging behaviors because they don’t know any other way to respond to a situation.
When Prevention Methods Fail

When evaluating our classroom practices, we must keep in mind that the goal of this exercise is to determine how we can change our environment and practices to increase the likelihood that children will engage with materials, activities, and people as a strategy for decreasing the likelihood that children will engage in challenging behaviors. Changes in the physical environment, the schedule, the activities, and the social context of the classroom should be made with the goal of increasing engagement.

We have offered four keys we think are critical to being successful when dealing with challenging behaviors. While we believe attention to these issues will assist in reducing challenging behaviors, we are not suggesting these tactics are adequate for addressing all problem behaviors. The focus of our discussion has been on what we, as teachers, can do to change our attitudes about challenging behaviors, to reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors occurring, and to deal with challenging behaviors using a more positive approach that considers the context and function of the child’s behavior. We recognize that even when we have addressed these issues in our classrooms, there will be occasions of challenging behaviors.

Because of the seriousness of some challenging behaviors (e.g., biting, poking other children with scissors), and their persistence in the face of preventive measures, a more direct, labor-intensive approach may be needed. How do we decide when our preventive efforts are truly overmatched?

How do we decide to call in outside help? While we have no easy answers, we can suggest that the team involved with the child spend the necessary time to ask and answer the questions on the question checklist provided in Table 1 prior to implementing any more elaborate strategies than those we have offered.
Concluding Thoughts
A mutual colleague of ours is fond of saying, “You can’t provide any service if nobody comes.” It is a seemingly self-evident, almost trite comment. Yet, when it comes to young children with challenging behaviors, it nicely summarizes the most fundamental of issues. For many children who engage in challenging behaviors, the greatest programmatic efforts are often devoted to removing these children from the setting. We sincerely hope this paper will inspire more mature, sophisticated, and accepting responses to challenging behaviors. The status quo alternative of “antiseptic bouncing” simply does not address the problem.

Reference

Bibliography
The following journal articles and books describe in more detail many of the recommended practices in this article.