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## Behavior is Communication: Addressing Behavioral Concerns in the Early Childhood Classroom

Kirsten Bonifacio and Susan Dixon, staff at the Early Childhood Center, presented the following information at the Indiana Early Childhood Conference on April 7, 2017.

*"Samantha is a 4-year-old girl who is enrolled in ABC Preschool in Indianapolis, Indiana. When in circle time Sam has a tough time sitting still and concentrating. She does not raise her hand. She speaks out of turn and will not stay seated. This happens consistently during circle time and Samantha isn't the only one; several other children do the same things."*



We all have a Samantha in our classroom, don't we? When Samantha "acts out" during circle time, what is she *saying*? When groups of children are distracted during your circle time, what does that *communicate* about your lesson? At its root, communication is a **behavior** that is meant to bring about changes in a person or child's environment, to exchange information, or to structure social situations (Davis & Dixon, 2010). The next question is *why* are Samantha and a few of her peers exhibiting these specific behaviors? Across the Applied Behavior Analysis literature, four primary "functions" are identified that explain behavior:

1. Attention (from a teacher or a peer)
2. Access to something tangible (toy, snack)
3. Escape
4. Sensory Stimulation



Samantha may display these behaviors for one primary function or for several reasons, but as early childhood professionals we must ask, what is she trying to communicate at this time and in this setting. This is important because children may exhibit the same behavior across different settings, but do so for different communicative reasons! Although Samantha is likely exhibiting several behaviors across multiple settings at school, it is necessary to focus in on one behavior at a time. The case study presented above discusses Samantha's "disruptive behavior" at circle time

(operationalized as not raising her hand, speaking out of turn, and not staying seated). **What appears to be the primary function of her behavior?** It may be difficult to determine given the importance of classroom context and individual needs, but one possibility may be that Samantha's behavior (and the behavior of some of her peers) serves as a way to escape from circle time activities. *When children are communicating the need to escape from our classroom activities, we must assess our classroom practices.* Children may need to escape because an activity is too challenging or because it requires too much sustained attention and is therefore not developmentally appropriate. One clue that this may be the case is that circle time is problematic for several of the children in this classroom, not just Samantha. When many children exhibit "challenging behavior" during the same activities, we must pause to reflect on some of our practices and ask ourselves questions such as:

- Is the content of what I am teaching at the right level for this group of children?
- Am I explicitly teaching behavioral expectations for my classroom in general and for circle time specifically?
- How consistently are we (myself AND my teaching partners) enforcing the rules and expectations?
- Are challenging behaviors occurring only in circle time or at other times as well?

### Resources

Davis, K., & Dixon, S. (2010). *When Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Understanding the Challenging Behaviors of Young Children and Students with Disabilities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

### Proactive Approaches

Classroom Rules should be understandable, concrete, and posted. You might even have the children help generate the rules, when applicable. Behaviors should always be stated positively, telling children what to do, not what not to do. Also be sure to be consistent with consequences for both reinforcement and punishment!

Visual Supports and Daily Schedules should be posted and reviewed with the children. When possible try and follow the schedule, but communicate changes when necessary. Examples of visual supports include a beginning of the day checklist, a display of calm-down choices, and visuals showing how to follow directions such as treating others nicely.

Environmental/Physical Modifications are necessary to consider for each part of your classroom, including all materials, activities, and even specific children. For example, you might seat children with frequent behavioral difficulties near you and not next to one another. Also, when children are easily distracted by extraneous stimuli, you might avoid seating them next to windows, class pets, etc.

Providing choices allows children to select something that is preferable and gives them control. This might be helpful particularly for children who become defiant in specific situations and during transitions.

Plan Your Transitions strategically by asking questions such as Does everyone need to go at the same time? What do the children who are waiting do?



## Creating Conversations that Count

Susan Dixon and Lynne Hall, staff at the Early Childhood Center, presented the following information at the Indiana Early Childhood Conference on April 7, 2017.

Every conversation we have has the potential to be a meaningful interaction. Conversations are a give and take of ideas, not only facts. They can happen anywhere, anytime and with anyone. Serving lunches, waiting in the hallway to use the bathroom or walking in a line to the playground can be as perfect a time for talking with children as circle time, free choice time or lunch at school. The key is to use questions that continue ideas, not control them. What does that mean? Questions that continue ideas are those that ask why something happened or what the child thinks about an idea. These questions are open-ended and have multiple possible answers. Try to avoid always using “testing” questions. These questions only have one answer and are the type that ask what color things are or what animals say.

How do these conversations begin? Parallel talk can start the conversation. Talk about what you are doing together by simply commenting on what’s happening (“You are using a lot of gray in that picture.” or “That is a really deep hole.”). You can then branch out to more thought-provoking questions. Why did that happen? What’s interesting about what you are doing together? Does it remind you of something you have done before? How is it the same, or different? What can we do next? What would happen if...? The possibilities are endless.

What do you notice about the questions proposed above? They entail talking with a child, not at a child. Asking these types of questions often means making a shift in your typical interactions. First, it takes time. Walking by and making a comment such as “I like your painting” may be momentarily reinforcing, but it doesn’t lend itself to



supporting a child’s thinking. Try something like this instead. “You have worked really hard on that painting. Tell me about it.” (Pause and wait for an answer!) “How did you decide to use that color?” (Pause and wait.) “This is a very interesting technique. What did you use to make it look like the ocean you described?” (Pause and wait.) Notice the “pause and wait” component of this interaction. Preschool teachers are often fast-paced, busy teachers. It’s easy to fly by and make cursory comments to a number of children in a short time. Conversations take time. Time to develop ideas and explore meanings. Time for you to enter into the activity and expand vocabulary, facilitate experimentation with materials and problem-solve together. Time to recognize the child’s interests and follow their lead. Most important, time to listen.

To facilitate children’s thinking, teachers need to shift away from directing activities and interactions. Thoughtful questions can move conversations beyond just giving information (which is also important at times) to supporting children’s higher order thinking skills. Conversations with children shouldn’t always be testing sessions focused on rote memory. The right questions can help children make connections to information by referencing ideas or experiences they already have in their repertoire and then directing their thinking in new or unfamiliar ways. Questions can model different ways to think about a topic that may excite a new interest or curiosity. A rule of thumb might be to think before you ask a question—do you already know the answer? If you do, it is probably a testing question. If you don’t, go ahead and ask and see where the conversation takes you!



### Take Away Messages:

Take time to have extended conversations, develop ideas, facilitate thinking and language development.

Involve students in different levels of thinking by asking different kinds of questions.

Don’t ask a question if you already know the answer. This is testing, not having a conversation.

Ask open-ended questions that encourage children to predict, ask why or how something happened, and explain their thinking.

Talk about ideas and opinions, not facts.



## Engaging Families: How to Measure and Improve Interactions with Families

Katie Herron, staff at the Early Childhood Center and Lenore Friedly, staff at Early Learning Indiana, presented the following information at the Indiana Early Childhood Conference on April 7, 2017.

What is family engagement? According to the Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee (ELAC)'s Family Engagement Toolkit, family engagement is "families actively supporting their children's learning and development, and sharing the responsibility with early care and education providers who are committed to engaging with families in meaningful, culturally respectful ways."

Effective family engagement can be broken into four focus areas: **strengthen** families as child's primary educators and nurturers, **assist** families as connected, supported members of the community, **empower** families as child advocates and leaders, and **support** families as safe, healthy, and self-sufficient caregivers.

How are YOU doing? You can find out by taking the family engagement program assessment included in the toolkit. Visit <http://www.elacindiana.org/resources/> and scroll down until you see the toolkit and then download. There are 22 items and you can rate yourself on a 4 point scale from "Entering (1)" to "Excelling (4)". Based on family engagement program assessment data from 40 programs (all participating in one of the state-funded Pre-K pilot programs and ranked either a 3 or 4 on Paths to Quality), most family engagement practices in Indiana seem to fall somewhere between "Emerging (2)" and "progressing (3)".



Interested in doing the assessment but not feeling confident about completing it by yourself? Visit <http://www.iaccr.org/resources/trainings/default.cfm?id=0FBF5D64-5056-9F5D-E5197C8DA047CC73&action=launch> and complete an interactive module which provides additional information and examples to accompany each section of the assessment. If you participate in Paths to Quality, consider asking your coach to look at your results and partner with you to build high quality family engagement that moves beyond events and focuses on intentional, individual and effective relationships and interactions with families.



### Focusing on Focus Areas

**Strengthening Families as Child's Primary Educators and Nurturers:** What strategies do you use to get to know new families? How do you communicate with families on a regular basis? Is it one-way (notes home, newsletters) or two-way (conversations, texting, phone calls)? Do you talk to them an equal amount about successes and accomplishments? Do you offer family conferences? How do you learn about the cultures represented in your program? How do you make it easier for families to participate?

**Assisting Families as Connected, Supported Members of the Community:** How do you support transitions in your program, particularly to Kindergarten? How do you help families get to know one another? How do you reach out to new or isolated families? How do you connect families to resources?

**Empowering Families as Child Advocates and Leaders:** How do you get families involved in program decisions? How do you involve families with solving child concerns?

**Supporting Families as Safe, Healthy, and Self-Sufficient Caregivers:** How do you recognize and support children and families experiencing stress? How do you communicate with families about developmental assessments?

